SAKUMA SASAKI
Illustration by
ASAGI TOSAKA
The Seeds of Normalcy
The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES
5

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The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS’S HEROES
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The Seeds of Normalcy

"Um, could we move on to the matter at hand?"
!?
Arian
A girl with the Red Dragon's blood.
Shinichi Sotoyama
The Dirty Advisor of the Demon King.
"Master!"
Regina
Rino's mother. Known as the Blue Princess of War.
"Are you trying for a baby with Celes?"
"Hmm? What baby?"
?
Celes
A dark elf of few words.

"The backs of my ears are sensitive."
"What?"
"...I may be the adult here, but that doesn't mean I'll put up with anything."
"Um. Noted."

The Dirty Way to Destroy the Goddess's Heroes

The Seeds of Normalcy

5

SAKUMA SASAKI
Illustration by ASAGI TOSAKA

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

The Dirty Way to Destroy the Goddess’s Heroes
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Translation by Jordan Taylor
Cover art by Asagi Tosaka
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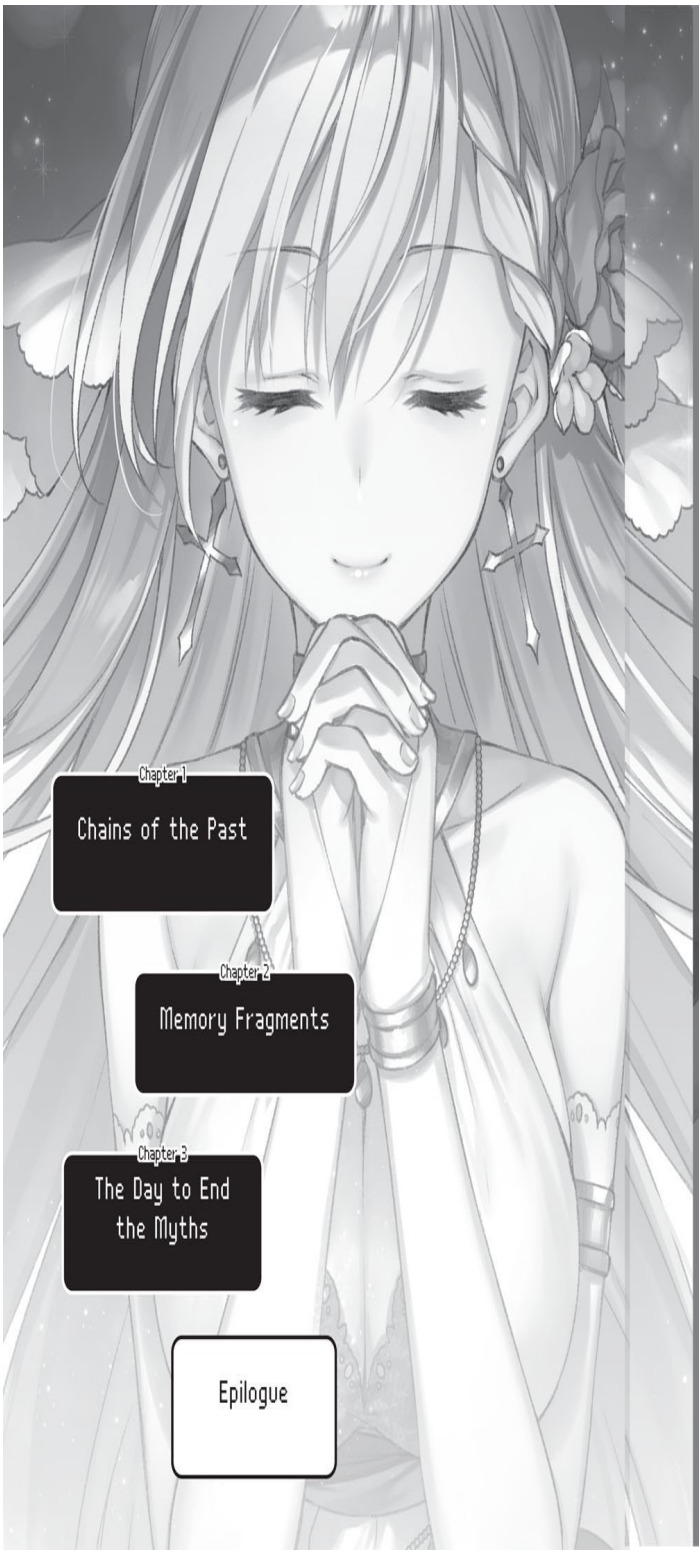

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Chapter 1
Chains of the Past

Pastoral fields. Lush forests. Rows of gray boulders crowded together on a mountain range. Clear water of a river reflecting light.

Nothing seemed to differentiate this land from the world above.

Nothing…except for the cow-sized, unicorn-horned rabbit nibbling on the grass, hunted down by a two-headed lion with four focused eyes.

In place of normal animals, only the most grotesque of beasts seemed to roam the underground.

Rays from the blue sun poured down on the demon world. The half-dragon hero Arian took it all in, marveling at the sights.

"Their sun doesn't seem to move," she observed.

It had been almost an hour since the Demon King teleported them away from a fatal attack waged by Goddess Elazonia. The sun hadn't budged in the sky since they'd gotten here.

"Maybe night never falls in this world?"

If the sun never sets, how do they mark the end of a day? Arian wondered.

Walking next to her, Celes, the dark elf maid, supplied an answer: "The blue sun fades at the same rate as the moon shines on the surface."

"What?! The sun turns *off*?!"

"Yes. It's almost night."

"Wow. That's so strange."

Arian couldn't wrap her head around how that could happen.

"As a demon, I was alarmed to see the sun move in the sky."

Celes narrowed her eyes, fondly remembering her first time on the surface.

"Your sky changes colors: from white to blue to red before fading to black. At night, the dim glow of the moon and stars break through the darkness… I'll never forget seeing it for the first time."

"That was unexpectedly poetic."

"Rude! As if you expect less," snapped Celes, looking over her shoulder.

Shinichi Sotoyama was usually one to jump on every opportunity to make a wisecrack.

However, the Dirty Advisor of the Demon King was stooped low, cradling a young girl in his arms. It didn't seem like he'd processed a single word of their conversation.

"…"

Celes elected to remain silent, because she knew about this girl created by Goddess Elazonia.

"Shinichi…"

Arian had no clue about who she was. She was dying to find out, but the solemn expression in Shinichi's eyes told her enough: This person meant the world to him. She was too scared to know the answer.

Leading the group was the Demon King's wife, Regina, carrying Rino, who had cried herself to sleep. An uncomfortable silence settled on them.

"There's my home," she announced.

Arian looked up to see a mountain-sized castle towering over them.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be carved out of a rocky sierra—it was a mountain fortress in every sense of the word. It made the familiar castle of the Demon Lord look like a shack in comparison.

"Wow…," Arian whispered in awe.

"My husband insisted on making 'the best home for our child' when he learned of my pregnancy. He wouldn't listen when I said we didn't need it, and he made this thing," she explained, drained.

The size of the castle seemed to symbolize the Demon King's love for his daughter. Regina must have known that, because she didn't seem too upset.

"I think we've relaxed enough. Let's fly the rest of the way," she suggested, casting a spell to float into the sky.

Celes followed her lead, casting *Fly* on herself, Arian, and Shinichi, who still clung to the little girl.

"We're going ahead. Meet you there," Regina called down to the rest of the demons.

"Understood, *oink*," grunted Sirloin, watching her soar toward the castle.

Taking flight, Arian looked down at the foothills, where the castle city stretched out in front of them.

"I can't believe there're so many demons…"

Familiar orcs and minotaurs meandered through the streets. Lizardmen and lamias bathed in the river. Goblins and kobolds argued in front of market stalls.

Teeming with demons, the streets seemed to be paved at random, unlike the urban grid of the Holy City, home to the Cathedral of the Goddess Elazonia. They were almost chaotic but overflowed with life, making Arian smile.

A group of harpy children noticed them and came up to them in the sky.

"Lady Regina!"

Their happy cries drew the attention of demons in the streets. When they saw the blue sun dance across her blue hair, they let out a loud cheer.

"Welcome home, Lady Regina!"

"Who did you beat up this time?"

"Fight me next!"

"Don't. She'll kill you with her pinkie again."

They waved at her, roaring with laughter. Their eyes communicated their respect of her strength and burned with desire to surpass her someday.

“You’re revered,” commented Arian.

“Because I’m strong,” replied Regina, waving back.

They touched down on the summit, which had been turned into the highest floor of the castle.

“Rino. We’re home.” She gently roused her daughter in her arms.

Rino rubbed her eyes, tacky from dried tears.

“Hmm… Mommy? …Ah! Daddy—?!”

“I know. Calm down. You can fill me in.” Regina stroked her hair to keep her from bursting into tears again.

She invited the others into the drawing room. Only Shinichi made no attempt to enter, stopping in front of the door.

“…Lady Regina, I’m sorry. Go without me.”

“Hmm?”

“…I need some time to think alone,” he admitted weakly, gazing down at the face of his childhood friend sleeping in his arms.

When she saw his expression, Regina didn’t press him about it, instead pointing down the corridor.

“You can use the guest room over there.”

“Sorry…” Shinichi apologized again before disappearing down the hallway.

She sighed upon closing the door to the drawing room. “I don’t know what happened, but he’s a poor excuse for a man.”

Demons valued strength over all else, which meant she couldn’t help being annoyed by his current state.

However, the three maidens immediately rushed to his defense.

“Shinichi isn’t pathetic!” Arian cried.

“Uh-huh! He’s really cool and kind!” Rino added.

“I insist you refrain from dismissing him without knowing his circumstances,” Celes warned.

Admonished by both her gentle daughter and obedient student, Regina widened her eyes. It didn’t take her long to read between the lines. The corners of her beautiful lips curled up.

“Oh-ho. I see. Seems there’s been some…developments during my absence.”

“…My Lady?”

Celes realized her mistake a moment too late.

Regina released her taciturn student from her gaze, bowing her head to them all.

“You’re right. It was impolite to talk behind his back without knowing everything. Forgive me.”

“We should be apologizing for raising our voices,” Arian replied.

“I don’t want you to say anything mean about Shinichi, Mommy…”

“I know. I’m sure.” Regina ran her fingers through her daughter’s hair.

Speaking of the devil, she let her lips spread into a wicked smile like Shinichi’s trademark smirk.

“How about you fill me in about him?”

“Of course!”

“…Erm?” Arian seemed the opposite of overjoyed.

Disclosing everything about Shinichi would give verbal proof of the events that had transpired between them. It might include the embarrassing way they’d met: He’d witnessed her naked body attacked by a slime and licked the scales on her throat. She couldn’t help worrying every little secret would come out.

“…Celes?” Arian looked to the maid for help.

“…Save it.” She seemed helpless, shaking her head.

Celes might have been one of the smarter demons, one who tried to solve everything with raw power, but they were dealing with Regina—her master.

In intellect, rhetoric, and physical strength, Regina ranked above them.

“Go on. Tell me everything.”

“Uh, I–I need to go to the bathroom…”

Upon seeing the glint of the town gossip in Regina’s eyes, Arian tried to slip out of the drawing room. However, *Hard Lock* had been cast on the door, sealing it tight. It wouldn’t budge even when she pushed and pulled.

“What’s happening?!” she cried, starting to panic.

Regina chuckled under her blue hair. “Don’t you know? There’s no use running from the Demon King’s wife.”

“Eek—!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Rino.

Unlike the other two, she had nothing to be ashamed of.

Under the guise of full transparency, they started to divulge their deepest, darkest secrets.

After an hour, their discussion came to a close, finishing with a disgusting cup of demon-world tea prepared by Celes. Regina downed it without raising an eyebrow.

“I see. My husband was defeated.”

No anger or distress settled on her face, though her other half had been captured by the enemy. In fact, she seemed excited by the prospect of a powerful opponent. Her eyes shone like sharpened knives.

“Except the Goddess used underhanded—” Arian started to protest.

“You’re so naive. A defeat is a defeat. It’s his fault for not reading into her crafty plans.” Regina sighed, cutting Arian off mid-sentence. “He’s lost his spark since Rino was born. He’s nothing compared with his younger days, when he shone as bright as the blue sun, when we tried to kill each other. I’m certain he never would have been taken captive back then.”

In other words, if his body and mind hadn't gone soft in Rino's absence, he would have noticed the magic circle on Fey's stomach as soon as he laid eyes on her and blown her away before asking any questions.

Rino's eyes started to well up with tears again.

"I'm so sorry…"

"Don't cry. You haven't done anything wrong. It's all the fault of El-something-or-other," Regina immediately cooed, giving the Demon King a run for his money on who the most overbearing parent was.

When the Blue Princess of War observed Arian smiling dryly at her, she cleared her throat, instantly switching topics.

"Anyway, I can't accept him losing to another woman. I won't feel better until I give her a good thrashing."

Her crass words didn't hide her genuine concern for him. Regina seemed to drip with murder and magic, causing Arian to break out into a cold sweat.

"But we don't know where she is, and…"

She chose not to finish her sentence and looked in Shinichi's direction, staring at the guest room.

It was hard to imagine winning against the Goddess with brute force. After all, she had managed to weaponize Fey, an innocent explorer, to capture Rino, proving she wouldn't think twice about using nasty tricks.

Their only bet was to pick the brains of the Demon King's Dirty Advisor. Their every strategy until now to beat back the heroes had drawn on his ideas.

However, their MVP seemed crushed ever since he laid eyes on that girl and had locked himself away in another room.

"Shinichi…," Rino whimpered, looking in his direction.

"……" Celes stared at the ground in silence.

Regina had picked up that her student's attitude was unlike the others'.

"Celes, tell me about Sleeping Beauty," she said, referring to the girl in his arms.

"—?!" The maid practically jumped out of her skin.

Her reaction made it obvious that she had some insight into the relationship.

"You know about her…," Arian accused. Shinichi must have confided in Celes; her chest felt like it had been stabbed.

This wasn't the time to be jealous.

"Tell us! Who is that girl? Why is Shinichi in pain?!" she demanded, grabbing Celes's shoulders.

"Well…" She averted her gaze, becoming silent.

Regina let out a frustrated sigh. "I get you can't talk about it lightly. You've always been a stubborn one. Even when you were a little girl."

"Can we not talk about the past?" Celes snapped, though it fell on the deaf ears of the woman who had taken her in.

"Or do you want to keep this little secret between the two of you?"

“My Lady!”

“Heh-heh-heh. You’re too old to be blushing for nothing.”

“Let’s switch the focus away from my age! You’re the one who brainwashed me into thinking that ‘all men have the hots for younger girls’ and ‘rag on older women’!”

“That was just my way of looking out for you. I was worried you’d miss your opportunity to get married since you always had your mind on taking care of me and Rino. I just had to give you a nudge in the right direction.”

“Stay out of my business!” Face flushed, Celes stuck her nose in the air.

Arian was floored to see the composed maid throw a childish tantrum.

“I never dreamed of seeing you this flustered…”

“She’s always like this with Mommy,” explained Rino.

“Uh-huh,” Regina affirmed. “Until one day…she started acting too cool for us…”

“Because you and Ribido make fun of me for everything!”

Celes glared, vein throbbing in her temple, but the Blue Princess of War shrugged it off.

“Think of it as motherly love. To spread some cheer, since you used to be too cynical as a child to show your smile to anyone.”

“Since when is Celes cynical?” Rino asked.

“Can we *please* move away from the past?!” Celes tried to clamp her hand over Regina’s mouth to stop her from revealing details about her time as a slave to Rino.

The Blue Princess of War sidestepped her, looking serious again.

“Anyway. You need his input, right? We won’t be able to help him heal if you don’t let his wounds breathe out in the open.”

“…”

Celes kept her lips tight, even when the conversation went full circle.

Regina sighed again.

“Based on our conversation, he possesses intellect and courage, but he’s become as empty as a scarecrow at the sight of the young girl. Am I right to assume she’s either a dead relative or girlfriend?”

“…Yes.” Celes nodded, unable to skirt it any longer.

“Shinichi’s girlfriend, huh…

“Well, I guess more like a good friend? Since she seems too young to date!” Regina added when she saw her daughter clutch her chest.

Arian looked directly into Celes’s eyes. “Tell us more.”

It wasn’t really ethical to pry into someone’s past through a third party. Arian would have to deal with the consequences of Shinichi despising her if he ever found out. But she hoped some of his walls would come down.

Celes just couldn’t say no to those burning eyes.

“That’s Nozomi. Shinichi’s childhood friend from his previous world, *Earth*. She drowned in the ocean eight years ago.”

She didn’t leave anything out, revealing everything about the girl’s identity and impact on Shinichi.

It was impossible for them to understand the full weight that death carried in Japan since they lived in a world where war was an everyday reality and the dead could be resurrected with magic. But they had all experienced the loss of a loved one that left them with emotional scar tissue.

“Losing someone sucks, especially when you can’t do anything to stop it.”

Arian had seen her mother wither away during their long journey, refusing to be healed or resurrected by the church. With her head low, she remembered her own helplessness, the knowledge that she could do nothing but watch her mother die.

“……”

Rino had witnessed the last moments of the poor explorer—Fey’s tearful smile flashed in her mind.

She wiped her own tears away with her hand. “I understand he was hurt. But Nozomi is okay now. Right?”

She couldn’t possibly imagine a spell to resurrect the dead from another world, but the Goddess Elazonia had managed to pull it off.

Didn’t that mean Shinichi had no reason to be sad anymore?

Arian jumped to her feet, racing toward the door, where Regina’s *Hard Lock* spell had been removed. She burst into the corridor and barreled through the door of the guest room Shinichi was in.

“Shinichi!”

“…Arian?”

Shinichi turned listlessly toward her.

Her eyes locked onto his hand resting on the girl’s forehead—the exact hand that had cradled her own head, unrepelled by her half-dragon blood. Something ugly seeped into her heart.

“Shinichi. Um…”

Do you still love her? Do you have no need for me anymore?

Arian plastered a smile on her face, concealing her budding jealousy.

“I’m so happy you reunited with Nozomi!”

Her words befit a true hero, praying for other people’s happiness over her own.

“How…?”

“I’m really sorry. I forced Celes to tell me. But I couldn’t be more glad about how things turned out.”

“……”

“Don’t worry about the Demon King. I promise we’ll save him…,” started Arian, taking his hand in hers.

She was screaming inside as she offered her biggest smile.

“Return to Earth with Nozomi, Shinichi.”

Then he would be out of Elazonia’s reach.

He might even live a happy life with this girl.

She couldn’t possibly stomach the idea of seeing them together. It would make her turn to the dark side.

“You weren’t born in this world; you’re only here because he summoned you. This isn’t something you need to worry about.”

If only he could stay by her side. If only he had eyes for her.

But she didn’t want him to hate her. She wanted to be his trusted hero—forever and always.

“Go back to Earth, Shinichi.”

It went against every fiber of her being.

“……”

They locked eyes for a moment.

Then he flashed her a wry smile, reaching up to wipe away a tear from her cheek that she hadn’t realized was there.

“You can be a difficult one. You know that?”

“Um… This isn’t what you think it is!” Arian desperately tried to hide the tears.

Shinichi pulled her in by her slender shoulders, giving her a tight squeeze.

“It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But…”

She could have jumped with joy! Shinichi placed a finger on her lips to silence her before she could imply the opposite.

“Leave? After stirring the pot? That would be too irresponsible, even for me. Plus, I’ll never sleep again if I don’t give that unholy Goddess what she deserves.”

“You’re starting to sound like yourself again.”

When she saw his lips curl into a dirty smile, Arian beamed back at him before burying her face in his chest.

Someone whistled from behind as they continued to hug in silence.

“How passionate! Are you going to kiss her? I’ll step out if you’re going to try for babies.”

“…You sound like a dirty old man.” Shinichi let out a sigh in frustration.

Regina had been peeking through the door, obviously curious about their exchange.

“You know what they say. ‘Life is short, make babies, girl.’ Hop on it, sister.”

“That’s not how it goes!”

“Hmm? Do they say something similar in your world? Anyway, you might want to put some distance between you. Otherwise, my daughter and student might go off on you.”

Regina chuckled, dragging Rino and Celes in from the corridor.

“Hmph! How unfair! Arian is the only one who gets a hug…”

“I should have known the dirty Goddess’s hero would give herself a running start.”

“Wh-what?! Th-that’s not what’s happening here!”

When their cold gazes pierced through her, Arian practically jumped away from him.

It was Regina’s turn to sigh. “You should have used that opportunity to show off your bond. You’ll never secure your relationship otherwise.”

“I get the impression you’re speaking from experience,” Shinichi observed.

“Because I am. Even though we had a happy marriage, there were plenty of women trying to wedge themselves between us and bear his children.” Regina shrugged it off.

“Gotcha.” Shinichi seemed satisfied with her answer.

Any child of the Blue Demon King would possess magic beyond any normal demon. There had to be women who were dying to have his babies, even if he didn’t marry them.

“I guess motherly love could be wanting strong children, if strength is the common currency between demons.”

“Well, *I* thought they were a bother.”

“What’d you do about them?”

“I didn’t kill them. Not *quite*.”

“Uh-huh.” Shinichi didn’t press her.

Based on her smile, it had to be something egregious.

“Okay. Enough chitchat, Future Son-in-Law.”

“Are you talking to me?”

“Who else? Anyway, are you aware of *that*?”

“……”

With a pained expression, Shinichi remained silent as Regina, her eyes sharply focused on him, pointed at Nozomi’s sleeping face.

“Based on that reaction, I’m guessing you know.”

“Hmm? Is something wrong with Nozomi?” asked Rino.

“……”

Rino wasn’t following, but Regina refused to say more, a sour expression settling on her face. After an excruciating moment of silence, Shinichi asked for a favor.

“Could you take a look? My magic might have missed something.”

“Of course.” Regina walked over to the bed.

Shinichi was clinging to the last shred of hope, knowing it was impossible.

She placed her palm on the girl’s forehead, focusing on her inner emotions. “Reveal your secret thoughts. *Mind Reading*.”

The epic spell allowed her to read thoughts, probing the deepest recesses of someone’s psyche. There was a risk that her own mind would fuse with the target’s brain. In the worst case, her own mind would be destroyed.

Even so, she cast the spell without a moment’s hesitation—not because she was strong, because there was nothing for her mind to fuse with in the first place.

“It’s completely blank. Nothing.”

“I knew it…” Shinichi’s head hung in disappointment.

“What does that mean?”

Regina replied to Arian. “No memories. No personality. No brain. She’s an empty doll.”

“What? But Nozomi is alive!” cried Rino in shock, touching the girl.

Her skin was warm with blood. Her chest rose with each breath. But being biologically alive and being conscious were very different.

“If you don’t believe me, cast *Mind Reading* yourself. You’ll understand when you can’t find anything.”

“I will,” volunteered Celes, placing her hand on the girl’s forehead.

Her expression started to harden as she scoured the brain.

“…You’re right. There are no memories or emotions.”

“See? That is not a living human. It’s a hollow doll made of flesh.”

Even though her vital organs worked, she couldn’t walk or talk of her own volition, meaning she was closer to a vegetative state like a coma. Except even a coma allowed for a miraculous recovery.

This doll never had a psyche, which meant there would be no miracle cure, and there was no chance of her opening her eyes.

“I guess it makes sense if you think about it.” He looked angry as he touched her cheek. “Nozomi died eight years ago. Cremated—not even a single strand of hair was left. All information in her brain vanished. No DNA was saved. There’s no way she could have been resurrected.”

“That means…”

Celes remembered Shinichi telling her about that when they’d first talked about it. Without intact memories, there was no way to bring someone back. Not even as a copy like the “Swampman.”

“This only looks like her. Even their genetic composition is different.” Shinichi regretted not realizing it sooner. “Elazonia cast *Create Life*. Not *Resurrection*, which brings back the dead. Instead, she created a copy of Nozomi.”

“You can do that?!” asked Arian in disbelief.

“If you have enough scientific knowledge and magic,” answered Shinichi, furrowing his eyebrows. “Humans are made of water, proteins, and fats. With the right materials, you can create a human body, like *Element Conversion*. This isn’t her first time using it.”

“Really?”

“Resurrecting the heroes. She can construct new bodies out of nothing, even after their bodies are obliterated.”

“No…”

Arian didn’t know the “Swampman” thought experiment, but she instinctively felt fear. She’d never died before—protected by her half-dragon power and her caution as a monster hunter. However, if she had decided to fight the Demon Lord by respawning instead of running away, she would have become a “Swampman” like the rest of them.

She shuddered at the thought. Shinichi placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Nozomi died in another world, which means Elazonia shouldn’t have access to her genetic information, preventing her from making a proper clone. But there are plenty of ways to create something that resembled her.”

Elazonia could have found someone who bore a resemblance to Nozomi and analyzed her DNA from a strand of hair, which would serve as a template for the clone. By tweaking her facial features with magic, the Goddess would succeed in making her creation.

“That’s how she must have made Fey,” added Shinichi.

“What?!” Rino cried with a jolt when she remembered Elazonia’s words. “Is that what she meant when she called her a fake doll…?”

“It’s difficult to construct a personality from thin air. I imagine she referenced an existing person before *Installing* any necessary changes.”

The reference could be a relative or even a manga character. By preloading it with thousands of opinions, the doll would be virtually indistinguishable from a real human.

It was like a more sophisticated version of a chatbot, boosted by magic. The only difference was this software wasn’t installed onto a computer but injected into a living brain. That meant it was as organic as a human, making it almost impossible to tell apart from a real person.

“I might have noticed something was off if we’d really talked…”

Fey had been made to infiltrate Shinichi’s group during their search for the Elven Tomb. She had been convincing in her role as “an aspiring explorer from a wealthy family.” But if they had deviated from her script and turned the conversation to her parents’ birthdays and neighbors’ names, her story might have come apart at the seams.

Their folly had been keeping her at a distance since Shinichi had suspected she was an enemy. Plus, they had only been together for two days, which made it hard for him to spot any holes in her story. Shinichi regretted this.

Celes was trying to connect the dots.

“Does it mean she was a good golem?”

“You’re on the right track.”

Rino cried out. “A golem? How could you be so mean? Fey was…”

Even if her memories had been manufactured, Fey had divulged her dream to become an explorer with them, shielded Rino from the legion attack, flashed that tearful smile before her death. Fey’s emotions couldn’t be fake!

“Don’t call her a doll! Don’t call her a phony! I feel so bad for her!” Rino protested through tears.

“… You’re right. She was alive. Just like us.” Shinichi pulled her close.

Even if she had been created to push a certain strategy, Fey had a heart. If she had continued to meet and interact with people, if she had continued to learn and build organic memories, she would have become a “human.” Just like Shinichi.

Before she had the opportunity, her life had been taken by her creator.

“I hate…that I couldn’t do anything…!”

She couldn’t save Fey. In fact, her only contribution had been becoming Elazonia’s hostage. And that had led to her father’s capture.

The burden of that incident was too much for Rino, who had never experienced anything of this caliber living with her overprotective father.

However, Shinichi was happy to see her facing the problem instead of breaking down.

“Me too. That’s why we need to work hard to get the Demon King back.”

“…Okay!” Rino wiped away her tears.

Shinichi nodded at her, smiling, before turning to look at the sleeping girl again.

“Nozomi has no heart. Not like Fey…”

“How does the Goddess know about her?” Arian asked suddenly.

She understood that it was possible to make an exact replica of someone with enough knowledge and magic, but Shinichi was the only one who knew Nozomi’s appearance.

Shinichi had a pained expression.

“Elazonia searched my mind using *Mind Reading* through Fey.”

When they had been attacked by the ghosts of old security golems in the Elven Tomb, they had retreated to the elves’ village. That night, he had woken from his slumber with a pounding headache and Nozomi next to him. That must have been when his memories were probed.

Which explains why I dreamed of Nozomi. And why my head pounded like I’d cast Search.

Shinichi was feeling resentful about his mistake, wishing he’d noticed sooner.

“But why was the Goddess searching your memories?” Celes asked.

Elazonia had already achieved one goal: getting close to Rino to capture the Demon King. However, she’d risked revealing her plans by making Fey cast *Mind Reading*, which implied she’d had the desire to search his mind… for some reason.

Shinichi looked strained.

“Probably to seek out any weaknesses of the Demon King, other than Rino. Or she’s interested in me for some other reason.”

“You think the Goddess has the hots for you? Get a life,” Celes snapped, shooting him a cold glare.

“That’s not what I meant!”

For a moment, Shinichi let his lips break into a small smile…but it didn’t take long for his face to clamp down into a scowl.

“Elazonia has been observing us for a long time. It’s clear from the timing of Fey joining our team. And that was when she started to wonder about this boy with black hair.”

As a third party, he had spread rumors, destroyed reputations, damaged plans for concerts, and played the role of an Evil God to defeat the heroes. Shinichi’s strategies weren’t *impossible* to execute by a human in Obum, but they were certainly concocted from a deviant imagination.

“I imagine she wondered if I was a survivor of the ancient civilization.”

Though they had only uncovered elven bodies in the Elven Tomb, they had record of early humans from the holy book. If Shinichi had been resuscitated by the hibernation device, it would explain his understanding of the world.

There was physical proof that old knowledge had been passed down in Cemetarium Forest, home to the descendants of the elves from the ancient

civilization. The villagers possessed more advanced technical knowledge than humans, including the ability to use concrete, a modern invention.

“I had wondered myself if I had traveled to past Earth instead of to another world. It’s not impossible that she’d think the same.”

“Uh-huh.” Arian nodded.

“And Elazonia has some sort of complicated connection to the ancient civilization.”

It seemed plausible that the Goddess used same method as the hibernation devices in the Elven Tomb to resurrect the heroes, saving information from a mind. That would explain why she ordered the heroes to destroy the tomb, which connected this technology to her.

“I don’t know if she was planning to kill or use me if I was from the past. But she wanted to get to the bottom of it.”

“Which is why she probed your memories…”

“And learned I was from another world, stumbled on my weakness, and used Nozomi to her advantage.”

It was better to shut the mastermind up than to try to kill him, which would enrage the demons and pull her away from her goal of capturing the Demon King.

“Plus, she managed to intimidate us by accomplishing something that was impossible for the Demon King: resurrecting the dead from another world.”

“Except it was a counterfeit. A cheap trick.” Regina grinned, impressed by Elazonia’s detestable tactics.

Shinichi offered her a dry smirk, stroking the girl’s cheek.

“A counterfeit. Exactly. She doesn’t even have manufactured memories like Fey.”

Warmth radiated from her skin. He could almost imagine Nozomi springing to life and spewing out something stupid.

…Except there was no world in which she would open her eyes.

Any normal person would have prayed for the impossible in an emotional plea. However, Shinichi was a stoic student of science, albeit a discouraged one.

He evaluated the situation and confirmed with magic that she would never wake up.

“That’s enough. It won’t make you feel any better.” Regina stopped him from continuing to touch the girl. “I will turn her to dust. Will you be okay with that?”

“…Yes.” His head hung low, hiding his pain.

Rino’s face clouded with concern. “Mommy, what are you going to do to Nozomi?”

“This isn’t Nozomi. It’s not even alive. I’m returning it to the earth.”

“What?! But…Nozomi…is still alive…!” She pointed at the flushed cheeks and rising chest.

Regina just shook her head. “It never had a heart. It can’t even eat in this condition, meaning it will die within three days.”

“But…”

“A few months, tops, if we give it mashed meat. But what’s the point of taking care of a sleeping doll? We’re just going to suffer longer.”

“……” Rino went silent, unable to argue against the logic.

Her mother put the final nail in the coffin. “Or you can use magic to transform it into your personal flesh golem.”

“What?!”

“It’s possible with your magic. Like what El-something-or-other did to Fey.”

“I could never!” Rino balked.

“Then our only choice is to return it to the soil.”

Rino couldn’t bring herself to control the dying girl—it had broken her heart to see Fey used and discarded like an old rag.

Even though she understood, she couldn’t keep her tears inside.

“I hate this… They didn’t do anything to deserve this…!”

“Then let’s put an end to it.” Shinichi stroked Rino’s hair and nodded at Regina.

The Blue Princess of War opened the guest room window, clutching the small body in her arms.

“Break the chains that bind everything. Transform it into dust of light. *Disintegrate*.”

A glow started at her hands and washed over the girl’s body, dissolving it into molecules. Fine sand blew out the window, disappearing into the sky under the blue sun.

Shinichi offered a prayer to her empty form.

I can’t blame you for your methods, Goddess Elazonia.

It was a basic strategy: find their Achilles’ heel. It wasn’t cowardly. Shinichi had done his fair share of nasty things. He wasn’t in a position to judge her.

Don’t come crying to me when I give you a taste of your own medicine.

The Goddess Elazonia didn’t have a place in his plans for a world of fun, where innocent lives weren’t exploited for someone else’s gain.

Shinichi stared out the window as the light from the blue sun faded, drawing the curtains of night.

His clenched fist drew blood.

After saying his good-byes to the life that slipped away, they gathered in the drawing room.

“We need to find a way to defeat the Goddess Elazonia and save the Demon King…”

With a hardened voice, Shinichi broached the topic…until he looked beside him.

Arian was clutching her head, splayed out on the table.

“Ugh…Why did I…?”

“What’s up with you?”

“I was so insensitive…”

“Oh.” Shinichi remembered her words, connecting the dots.

“I’m so happy you reunited with Nozomi!”

By that time, Shinichi had already realized she was empty. That meant her comment had delivered a fatal blow.

“I can’t even express how sorry I am!” Arian banged her head against the table.

“Don’t worry about it. I was happy that you were concerned about me.” Shinichi tried to console her.

It reminded him of a certain dumbass.

Regina was sitting across from them.

“Future Son-in-Law, may I ask something?”

“What?”

“Are you trying for a baby with Celes?”

“““*BLERGH*?!”””

“Hmm? What baby?”

Rino was the only one who didn’t understand the dirty talk. Everyone else almost choked.

The corners of Regina’s mouth curled up in amusement.

“Apparently not. Celes has always been all talk, no action. Seems nothing has changed.”

“Master!” Celes slammed her fist on the table.

“Ha-ha-ha. I haven’t heard that in a while.” Regina didn’t seem to have a care in the world. “And no babies with Miss Arian, huh? Looks like you have a chance, Rino.”

“For what?”

“To become his bride.” Regina smiled gently, stroking her daughter’s hair.

Since this is Rino, I imagine she’ll be over the moon and cheery, Shinichi thought.

“Shinichi’s bride…?” Rino flushed red at the thought, squirming in embarrassment.

“Hmm?” He was confused by her reaction.

Regina broke into a goofy grin.

“Heh-heh-heh. Seems someone has become a woman. Watch out, Celes. Your ‘little sister’ is going to beat you to the finish line.”

“My Lady!”

“Ooh! Scary!” joked Regina, even as Celes radiated hostile magic and glared.

She seemed to have no intention of shutting her mouth, because she turned her attention to the redheaded hero next.

“You too, Miss Arian.”

“What?”

“Just saying that I’m siding with my daughter and student. I won’t get in your way, but I’m going to place my support on them.”

“…I’m aware.”

This meant war. They glared daggers at each other.

Shinichi stepped in, stomach aching. “Um, could we move on to the matter at hand?”

“Oh, sorry. It would be bad taste to plan a wedding without the bride’s father. Let’s save my husband.”

“Ha-ha…” Shinichi offered a dry chuckle.

Regina used every opportunity to push him into marrying her daughter.

I’m just going to pretend this is a joke to cheer up Arian and calm down…

It was hard to read her true intentions with her frozen smile.

I can see her giving a hard time to the Demon King. Shinichi sighed, guessing the Demon King had become an overbearing father because Regina was an uninhibited mother.

“Let’s look into these to find out the Goddess’s identity and location.”

Shinichi lined up four volumes recovered from the Elven Tomb.

“As I said, there has to be some connection between Elazonia and the ancient civilization. I think this might be our best lead.”

They’d had to obliterate the sacred site to defeat the evil ghost and had lost four books in Fey’s possession.

“Let’s each read one book.” Shinchi passed books to Rino, Celes, and Regina since they could use translation magic.

“These spells hurt my head, but I’ll try my best,” Rino said.

“Anything to save His Highness.”

“I have to admit I’m curious about this ancient civilization, totally divorced from El-something-or-other.”

They cast a spell to speed-read, cracking open the volumes and focusing on the stories of the ancient elves.

Relegated to spectating, Arian’s face clouded over. “I hate that I can’t help out…”

“Then fix us something to eat,” Shinichi suggested. “It’ll take a while to get through these books.”

“Okay! I’ll make it good!” Arian returned to high spirits, rushing off to find the kitchen.

Celes watched her go with a dark expression. “Anything cooked in this world will be…”

“No more *parbegut*…please…,” whined Rino.

They had developed a taste for human food.

Regina sighed in frustration. “It’s just food. Don’t throw a fit.”

“Only because My Lady has no taste.”

“Yeah! You just don’t know good from bad!”

Regina was quick to refute their angry claims.

“Rude! I have taste! Like…raw giant toad eggs! They go down smooth! Mmm! Yum!”

“‘“Ew.”’”

“Stop looking at me with pity!” The Blue Princess of War fretted when they looked at her with disappointment.

Shinichi couldn’t help smiling. “I remember you telling me that your mom had no taste.”

“Yeah! That’s why Celes cooks all the time. She’s never made anything by herself.” Rino pouted.

“Only because you turned down my soul food!”

“It’s child abuse to force a four-year-old to eat roast *gorajug* liver,” retorted Celes.

Shinichi wasn’t familiar with the monster, but he had a feeling it was gross. He stroked Rino’s head and tried to comfort her.

“You have the looks of your mother and the tastes of your father.”

The Demon King didn’t seem to have strong preferences, consuming food only for the purpose of building mass, but even he had developed a liking for goat meat and ale.

Rino widened her eyes. “No one’s ever told me that I’m like Daddy.”

With light skin and black hair, she was the tiny daughter of a blue giant. Everybody said she looked nothing like him.

“That would make His Highness jump for joy,” Celes said.

“Let’s go back to reading—so we can see him that way,” urged Regina.

They turned their attention back to their books, taking the occasional break to pick at Arian’s food. It took hours until Shinichi finished his volume. He let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ve got nothing. Not a single mention of Elazonia.”

Myths and Religions of the World. He had thought this one would provide some clues. It was an encyclopedia of all religions in the ancient civilization and their myths.

“It doesn’t delve into local religions, but it covers most of the major things…”

Greek myths claimed the universe was born from chaos. Japanese legends said two gods—a brother and sister—had come together to create land and sea.

Even in a magical realm, human imagination remained the same. It was interesting from an academic standpoint. In fact, he was eager to pore over the text again.

However, even when he sifted through these nuggets of knowledge, he kept coming up empty.

“Does that mean there was no Goddess before the calamity?” asked Arian.

“…That’s my best bet.” Shinichi nodded, accepting a porcelain cup from her and grimacing as he drank down the disgusting water. “I even considered the possibility of her name changing through history.”

Zeus in the Greek myths had become Iuppiter in Latin and Jupiter in English. It wouldn’t be surprising if Elazonia’s name had morphed over the years.

“I scanned the book for ‘the Goddess of Light,’ ‘Highest Among Gods,’ ‘Gatherer of Good Gods,’ even the ‘Symbol of the Sun.’ And…nothing.”

Even in a magical world that bridged the physical gap between genders, men were considered strong and women weak, since the latter had to take leaves of absence to bear children.

The myths and religions of the ancient world tended to skew heavily toward men. The main deity, who was known as the sun god, was male. His wife, the moon goddess, was female.

“No mention of a goddess of light in this book, let alone ‘Goddess Elazonia.’ I think it’s safe to assume she didn’t exist in the ancient world.”

That didn’t explain her connection to the old civilization.

“Is there God in this world?”

Based on the encyclopedia, their “gods” were supernatural existences walking among mortals. They had appeared before their followers to impart their teachings or perform miracles to save people from danger, but their stories couldn’t be scientifically proven.

“I know I asked you before, Arian, but you don’t know of gods and spirits other than Elazonia, right?”

“Yeah. And I’ve never met anyone who’s seen one.”

“Which means gods don’t take corporeal forms in this world.”

Shinichi knew Elazonia existed. They had been attacked by her.

“That proves she isn’t a god.”

“…You’re right.” Arian scrunched her face.

It didn’t feel good to insult the one who made her a hero and who she once worshipped. However, the Goddess had made enough people suffer that Arian had lost all respect for her.

“A real god would never do something so terrible.”

“Well, that’s not necessarily true…”

Shinichi knew that “gods” on Earth did the most outrageous things—gifting a box containing every evil in the world or annihilating all of humanity with a massive flood.

“At the very least, we know Elazonia isn’t the creator of the universe,” he concluded.

“If she had that much power, she wouldn’t have to take Rino hostage to threaten the Demon King.”

There was a limit to her strength. Even if she outclassed Shinichi’s group, she wasn’t omnipotent. That gave them ways to fight back.

“I guess that’s a lead. Did you find anything, Celes?” Shinichi looked over to her.

She closed her book and shook her head, eyebrows knit together.

“Nothing. That said, this book is baffling. I failed to understand most of it.”

“Makes sense.”

He’d expected that. He took the book from her: *Report of Countermeasures against Asteroid Diablo*, a detailed collection of predictions about the asteroid and ways to survive the ensuing disasters. It must have been written by an expert because it was filled with technical accounts, which made it indigestible to the average person, much less a demon.

“It lists formulas to predict the asteroid’s impact based on its angle and speed. That helped them make calculations of the underground bunker. This is my thing. I can see why it’s hard for you.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “…Are you *trying* to get a reaction out of me?”

Bowing, Shinichi gave her some candy as an apology.

“You were the only one I could assign this book to.”

It would go above Rino’s head. And Regina had no scientific background.

Celes had spent enough time with Shinichi listening to his scientific explanations, making her most suited for this task. She rolled the candy around with her tongue, trying to look stoic again.

“Could you please repeat that first part?”

“Um? You’re the only one?”

“With a little more emotion.”

“You’re the only one!”

“That will suffice.” Her ears wiggled at the confession.

“…Is it just me or have you gone soft?”

“Do you prefer when I’m mean to you? Looks like you’re as perverted as a certain light elf. Pig!”

“It’s not like I want you to be some sadist!”

After their normal schtick, Shinichi turned his gaze back to the books. Otherwise, Arian would demand to hear sweet nothings from him later. He could feel her jealously looking at them.

“I only skimmed the book, but I can’t find anything other than scientific data and formulas. I can’t imagine it’s talking about Elazonia.”

“I did read it cover to cover, even though I didn’t understand everything. There was no mention of the Goddess’s name.” Celes nodded, reaching out to turn a page. “But you might want to read this.”

She showed him a detailed drawing for something resembling a casket—designs for the hibernation equipment in the Elven Tomb.

“You guessed the bodies were restored with *Resurrection*, but you didn’t understand how they recovered the soul. The system is described here.”

“Seriously?!”

He pored over the text, but it was like looking through fog.

“In order to resolve the ego error found in the mana conversion of the neural network, magic conductor molecules are placed in a cubic grid structure…? I don’t get it.”

“I couldn’t parse through it, either…” Celes sighed.

“My head hurts,” Arian offered with a crooked smile.

The *Translation* spell let them read ancient words, but it kept phrases that had no equivalent in modern language. It was like how there was no Japanese translation for *parbegut*. The text was all jargon. They could read the words and still have no clue about the meaning.

“I think I have a general idea,” Shinichi admitted.

“Really?”

“Not the details, though.” He didn’t seem very confident. “It’s saying they turned memories into data and saved them into a specialized magic conductor.”

It was easier to think of it as a magic version of cyber-brains from science fiction. He wasn’t too surprised, since this had been his guess after observing the heroes.

“It requires an understanding of physiology, engineering, and ‘magicology.’”

“What’s the last one?”

“Based on the word, I’m guessing it’s the marriage between magic and science.”

This combined field gave birth to the magical guns of guard golems and artificial hibernation chambers.

“That sounds incredible,” said Arian, impressed by the idea.

Shinichi’s expression soured. “No doubt. But I think it can only be used by a magic user…”

Because science didn’t discriminate against people with no magic, Shinichi had taught Tigris Kingdom about gunpower. Without it, they had no way of standing up to the Goddess’s priests or heroes or demons or monsters. The root of the problem was this fundamental difference in power.

“I don’t think we can eliminate this disparity, since Earth was like this, too…”

…Though scientific advancements would close the gap.

“But magicology would be a huge boon to magic users. It’s scary to think these disparities could be exponential.”

Shinichi wasn’t inherently against magicology. In fact, he planned to give this book to the dvergr to begin more research. That said, without science, the power hierarchy would reach new extremes.

“I don’t know if we even need to aim for total democracy in a magical world.”

“Not following here.” Celes sounded annoyed.

“I’ll explain it in detail later.”

Shinichi was about to close the book since it didn't seem to have any other valuable information, but one thing caught his eye.

Doctor Elen Qunel?

The designer of the artificial hibernation chambers. A genius magicologist who'd made numerous other huge discoveries, apparently. According to the acknowledgements, Elen had given them hope for the future.

Elen, huh? Could be a guy's name…

The first syllable was the same as their sworn enemy.

Maybe he was on edge because of Nozomi.

He forced himself to smile.

"Future Son-in-Law," Regina called out. "I finished reading. Unfortunately, I didn't see any mention of El-something-or-other."

"Do you have something against learning Elazonia's name?"

"Yeah."

Regina handed him *World History*.

"It's an interesting read. War after war after war. Apparently, ancient people couldn't get enough, just like demons."

"Yeah, well, the history of humans is a tale of war after war."

Obviously, historians wanted to keep record of big events instead of focusing on times of peace. Shinichi opened the book and scanned the table of contents to get a general feel for historic events.

Regina reached over. "This war was interesting."

She flipped to the latter half of the book and pointed to a section detailing the catalyst of a world war. One mistake of a certain country had triggered a battle involving the supercontinent.

"June 8, 1703. The Republic of Sentel invaded the territory of the Black Proxy—Wait! The Proxy?!"

"Do you know what it is?" Celes asked Shinichi.

"Well, no. But it was mentioned in another book." He shook his head, opening *Myths and Religions of the World*. "Look. 'In recent years, the world has seen a surge of churches worshipping the Proxies. Its main followers have been victims of magical waves.'"

"Huh."

"What's a victim of magical waves?" asked Arian.

"I don't know." He shook his head again.

He cursed the ancient elves for neglecting to leave behind something like the *L—ngman Dictionary*.

"I wonder if the Proxy was an individual, if they're objects of worship. Why would an individual go to war against a country?"

"What's strange about that?" asked Regina.

"Oh yeah. Right."

The Blue Princess of War was an individual who would wage war against an entire country.

“This says the Republic of Sentel sent their entire military to fight against the Black Proxy, but lost… Wait. *What?*”

“Ha-ha-ha! Doesn’t that make you excited?” Regina broke into a smile. “Based on your findings, ancient people understood science and magicology, which made them very powerful. A single person who could take on an entire army? I would love to fight them.”

“This is from thousands of years ago, My Lady.”

Though their identity remained unclear, they must have passed from old age.

Shinichi sat nearby with his chin on his hand, lost in thought.

A “Proxy,” huh? Acting on behalf of something else. What could it be? Why does it sound familiar? Where have I heard of someone sending an entire army packing…?

He was just starting to think about using *Search* to jog his memory when Rino finally snapped her book closed.

“Wow. That was fun.”

“What was it about?” asked Arian, handing Rino a glass of water.

She took a sip before opening the book again to show them drawings of animals.

“Look at the doggies and fishies and other thingies!”

“*Illustrated Animal Encyclopedia,*” Shinichi read out loud with a smile.

The ancients must have predicted the extinction of these animals after the asteroid and amassed their images to keep a record.

Shinichi let Rino take this one because he’d assumed there would be no connection to Elazonia and would keep her entertained with pictures.

“I really want to see this rainbow kitty!” Rino held out an image of a psychedelic cat.

“Uh. I think it’s gross…” Arian seemed to back away.

Shinichi burst her bubble. “Says it’s endangered. I imagine it’s already extinct.”

Rino pouted before turning the pages again. “And there’s this transparent chameleon and flying snakes…and dragons.”

“What?!” Shinichi exclaimed.

“What did you say?!” Regina asked at the same time.

Arian was floored. “About…my…father…?

“Oh, that’s right. It’s your daddy,” said Rino, reflecting on her insensitive comment.

She thumbed through the book to find a picture of a massive body covered in bright red scales, membrane wings sprouting from its back. Horns dotted its head. Its large mouth was lined with rows of fangs. It was a picture-perfect dragon.

Shinichi read the description under the picture, eyes widening in surprise.

“‘Scientific Name: Red Proxy’?! Are dragons and Proxies the same thing?!”

According to the note, *dragon* was the common name. *Proxy* was the formal scientific name in academic writing.

He had a feeling of déjà vu.

“Which means the Black Proxy is the Black Dragon in the record about an entire army attacking it…”

“…It’s the same as the legends told in the demon world.”

Celes had wide eyes, remembering something from before.

She’d told Shinichi this fable in the Goddess’s Cathedral when they’d seen the painting of the Evil God and Evil Dragon. The Black Demon King had led an army to attack the Black Dragon, but they’d fled before inflicting a single wound. The tale ended with the king reflecting on his ego. That must have been based on the actual event instigated by the Republic of Sentel.

“Huh. Our beloved Black Dragon. Obviously, no human army could match it!” Regina made it sound like a victory, like someone rooting for their favorite athlete.

“Oh! I know that story!” Rino clapped her hands. She’d been so focused on reading that she hadn’t realized the connection.

“If they’re in history books and encyclopedias, that means dragons actually exist.”

Shinichi had never doubted Arian’s dad was a dragon, but he was excited to find concrete evidence.

He took the book from Rino and carefully flipped through the pages, coming across a map with five red dots. It felt like he’d been electrocuted.

“This is a map locating the dragons…”

“Gimme!” Regina pored over the map, looking positively out of her mind, before cackling. “Ha-ha-ha! If I go there, I will finally be able to have a real fight!”

“My Lady, I understand your excitement. But let’s focus on His Highness.” Celes gripped Regina’s shoulders, stopping her from sprinting away.

Shinichi looked as tired as Celes. “They made this map before the supercontinent split in three. There’s no guarantee the dragons are still there.”

It seemed the Black Dragon had been in the middle of the supercontinent, though the demons’ legends claimed it was slumbering somewhere underground.

“Huh? Fine… But we can prove it if we go there.” Regina’s shoulders slumped, though she was quick to pull herself together.

Shinichi nodded. “Now we know the dragons…are living witnesses to the ancient civilization. We can’t let this opportunity pass us.”

The four books gave them a better picture of Elazonia, though it was far from complete. They had no clues about her identity or location. However, they had hope that the dragons would have answers, seeing as they were worshipped as gods.

Shinichi'd had an inkling that this was true from his conversations with the Demon King and Sanctina. After all this time, he finally had a lead.

"I can't say for the other dragons, but the Red Dragon should be in the continent of Uropeh." Shinichi took out a current map, comparing it to the ancient one. "Seems things have changed since the supercontinent split. The coastlines look different, but I imagine the inland mountains have retained their shape."

He rotated the map, trying to find something that matched. It seemed the northeast part of the supercontinent had become modern Uropeh.

"If this is right, the Red Dragon should be here." He pointed north of the Holy City, past a craggy mountain range, to the northernmost part of the continent. It was undeveloped, empty land on the modern map.

"…He might be there." Arian nodded, touching the scales on her throat.

"Do you know something about this place?"

"It's got a terrible reputation." She smirked, pointing south of his finger. "Mouse Labor Camp is here. North of that is the restricted zone. Nobody's allowed to go in there."

"Sounds dangerous. Is there a reason for the name?"

"It's too cold for anyone to inhabit. But the real reason is that it's swarming with monsters." She continued with a deluge of details, prefacing that it was all rumors.

"The Matteral Mountains stretch from Tigris to Mouse, from west to northeast. The mountains act like a lid, containing the monsters to the uninhabited zones. It gets bad as soon as you cross the border."

It was a "magic zone," a nightmarish region without a single normal animal, where evil monsters lurked.

"I've heard stories about heroes being instantly defeated by man-eating plants, double-headed wolves, and poisonous slimes."

"Sounds like the demon world," Celes remarked.

"……"

Shinichi started to think. Something about her observation was working his brain.

Meanwhile, Regina's eyes sparkled with joy. "Hmm? Seems like fun. I must have missed it."

"That's right. You visited the human world once. Why didn't you go?"

"I hate the cold. I traveled the warmer areas." She pointed to the coastline along the south of the continent, far from the restricted zone in the north.

"I stumbled across a random human village and asked for their most powerful creature. They told me about a huge fish called a whale. I challenged one, but it died from one *Thunder Javelin*. One! I was so disappointed."

"Yeah, well, they were basing it on human standards…"

Poor whale. Being attacked by the Blue Princess of War was no joke. She was a battleship.

Shinichi switched the topic back. “A restricted zone overflowing with monsters, huh? Sounds like a perfect place for a dragon to hide from eyewitnesses.”

He couldn’t guarantee the Red Dragon was stationary. The Black Dragon sure wasn’t. However, they knew he had been in Uropeh seventeen years ago—when Arian’s mother was pregnant.

They were grasping at straws, but they had no other lead. They had to be all-in.

“…Arian.” Shinichi looked at the Red Dragon’s daughter.

He was trying to get permission to exploit their relationship if it came down to the wire. There was something sweet about him trying to get her approval; it was one of the reasons she was drawn to him.

“I want talk to him, too.”

Even though she had given up on meeting him in this lifetime, she had questions she wanted answered: How did he meet her mother? How did she come into being? Even if she hated the answers, the truth would help her move on.

“And I already told you that you have my life, my heart, my everything.” Arian smiled gently, implying he didn’t need to check in with her after all they’d been through.

He stared at her before snapping back to his senses and flashing his normal smile. “We’ve got to tell him that his loner of a daughter finally made some friends!”

“You can be so mean…” Arian pouted before looking up at him coyly. “Are you going to tell him that you’re my boyfriend?”

“What?! I don’t know about that…” Shinichi flushed, falling apart.

Regina chuckled at the heartwarming exchange.

“Heh-heh-heh. She makes a powerful enemy. You two don’t have time to beat around the bush.”

“Hmph…”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rino sulked and Celes glanced to the side, which made Regina burst into laughter again.

Chapter 2
Memory Fragments

They spent a full day preparing for their journey to find the Red Dragon—a living witness of historical events—before deciding to return to the surface of the planet.

"If you spot Elazonia, we're going to make a break for the demon world. Capisce?" Shinichi asked.

"Guess there's no other choice." Regina seemed reluctant, though she prepared a magic circle to use in that moment.

Celes used *Teleport* to send the group and their baggage up to the surface—under the red sun. They didn't see any sign of the Goddess, which spelled good news. But the Demon King's castle—their beloved home—had been smashed to pieces. Like it'd been hit by an asteroid.

"Oh my gosh! Mr. Woof and Ms. Meow…" Rino fell to her knees, knowing her treasured dolls were crushed in the rubble.

"…This will be one hell of a cleanup job," Celes joked, but her face was twisted in rage.

"What about the fields?!"

Arian whipped around, suddenly remembering the potato fields flourishing under her care. In its place were burned plots of land.

"I can't believe it…" She plucked an ashy potato leaf and gritted her teeth.

Farmed with Sirloin and Kalbi, these fields didn't just serve as a food source. They were proof of her friendship with the demons—after she had spent years by herself as a half dragon.

Her right hand squeezed the hero symbol on her skin, drawing blood.

"We can't let the Goddess get away with this…!"

"Like hell…" Shinichi felt a fresh wave of hatred toward Elazonia.

Just as they were about to leave Dog Valley, they heard a familiar voice call out to them.

"Rino… Rinoooo!"

"Eeep?!"

Crying out in joy and barreling toward them was the blond beauty—and major perv—Saint Sanctina. She practically pounced on Rino, wrapping her arms around her.

"Ooh! Her sweet odor! Her soft, supple skin! This isn't the hallucination that's tricked me hundreds of times! This is the real thing!"

"Sanctie! You're tickling me."

"Hallucinations in the triple digits? In under two months? You've got it worse than the Demon King." Shinichi reached out, trying to stop the crying saint from nuzzling Rino.

His touch was enough for the man-hater to snap back to her senses.

"It's you, Shinichi. I see you haven't bothered to become a woman yet."

"*That's* how you greet me?!"

"I just had this silly idea that my traumatic memories of you would become more exciting if you'd became a girl."

"I… You know what? Forget it!" Shinichi shuddered.

It seemed Sanctina had reached new heights with her weird fantasies in Rino's absence.

"And that gorgeous woman with blue hair is…?"

"Regina, Rino's mother."

"Mother-in-Law! I'd like to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage!"

"Be a little more mindful of the situation!" snapped Shinichi.

"Heh-heh-heh. Another interesting character, indeed." Regina looked down at the Saint, begging on the ground without any concern for the demolished castle behind her.

"Um, Sanctie… Shinichi and I are going—"

"Not now, Lady Rino. Things will get complicated," interrupted Celes, covering Rino's mouth before she could drop that bomb.

"Why are *you* here, Sanctina?" asked Arian, changing the subject.

Sanctina stood up like nothing had happened.

"I was searching for the girl and spreading her word when I had a feeling she'd be back soon. I just got here."

"What?! Did you, like…smell her in the air…?" A shiver went up Shinichi's spine.

It was far more ominous than the intuition of a girl in love.

"By the way, what happened to the Demon King and his castle?" asked Sanctina.

"Ah, well…" Shinichi summarized everything leading up to this point.

Even Sanctina's beautiful face emanated rage.

"Wind Cutter!"

Without warning, she sliced off her right hand, which had the symbol of the hero.

"Sanctie! What are you doing?!"

"Removing the foul mark placed by the heretic who would take you hostage."

"That doesn't mean you should cut your hand off!"

"You're not in a position to be all preachy."

Blood poured from the stump. Sanctina smiled as the others panicked.

"Let me heal it." Rino picked up the severed hand, attaching it to her arm. "Pain, pain, fly away, *Full Healing*."

"Oof! I can just feel your kindness sinking into my wound!"

"Don't tell me that's why you did that…"

It was certainly in the realm of possibilities. Shinichi glanced at the hero symbol on her healed hand.

"Regina, you can't *Dispel* that, right?"

“No. It’s like *Geas*, a curse that the target has accepted. It would require having far more power than the original caster to remove it.” Regina gnashed her teeth, hating that she was at the same level as Elazonia.

“Gotcha…” His shoulders slumped.

Behind him, Arian clenched her right fist. She couldn’t resist the Goddess with this symbol. In fact, she had been rendered powerless when the Demon King was captured.

“I…”

“Don’t cut your hand off again. It’s pointless,” warned Regina.

She’d noticed Arian’s brooding expression. It was hard to believe that symbolic gesture would free her from the Goddess’s curse, seeing how even vaporized heroes could be resurrected.

“Even if it slightly weakened her power over you, it’s no good for a swordswoman to lose her dominant hand.”

“…You’re right.”

“And let me beat the living shit out of her.”

“……” Arian wasn’t entirely okay with that, but with no other suggestions coming to her mind, she remained silent.

“Anyway, let’s go find the Red Dragon,” said Shinichi, trying to dispel the heavy mood.

Everyone nodded in response. That was when Sanctina piped up with a question.

“You said Arian’s dad is in the northernmost point of the continent. How are we going to get there?”

Walking would take weeks and put them at risk of monster attacks on the way. If they tried to use *Fly*, they would be drained of magic, which meant frequent pit stops and five days at fastest.

“Things could get ugly if too much time passes and people find out about this situation,” remarked Sanctina, pointing to the Demon King’s destroyed castle.

Without the presence of their enemy, everyone would assume the demons had been destroyed by Goddess Elazonia herself.

“You’re a lot more sensible when you’re not hung up on Rino.” Shinichi said, agreeing with Sanctina. Did he dare say he was even slightly impressed by her?

“If the church finds out about this, you’ll be back to square one. You’ll have to rebuild the relationship between demons and humans—just when things were starting to seem possible.”

Vermeita would stop cooperating with them if she found out the Demon King had been defeated, causing the author of her beloved series to scramble back to the demon world.

“We need to find the Red Dragon as quickly as possible. That’s what this is for!” Shinichi proclaimed, cocking his head at their large luggage from the demon world.

“What is it?” Sanctina stared.

She'd been wondering what it was. At first glance, it looked like a small bamboo boat, but it was covered by a transparent glass lid and long planks extended from either side like wings. It was peculiar.

"I get that it's some sort of vehicle…"

"It's a flying boat—called a glider."

Shinichi stroked the invention, which was his own design. The dvergr had stayed up all night to get it ready. It didn't have a propeller or jet engine. It wasn't that aerodynamic, either, since it had been thrown together. However, it was far more efficient than people flying through the sky without anything.

"If we can get it in the sky with *Fly*, it can glide in the air and get us to the northernmost point of the continent in just one day."

He'd only had this idea because he was familiar with airplanes, which allowed people to fly to the other side of the Earth in 24 hours. It was also a product of magicology, since they used *Protection* on the materials that lacked durability.

"When I flew to the Holy City with Celes, I started wondering if there wasn't an easier way."

"My hips hurt because you were riding me."

"Could you say it without the innuendos?" Shinichi cracked open the glass windshield, climbing into the glider. "I didn't account for you, Sanctina, but I think we can squeeze six people. It just means there's more in our 'magic tank.' Let's go."

"Yay!" Rino cried. "I've never ever been on a boat in the sky!"

"I call the seat behind Rino—"

"Lady Sanctina, you're sitting shotgun—where you can't touch anyone," said Celes.

"You're heartless!"

There was some squabble over seating order, but everyone got in the glider eventually.

"Let's go."

Regina used her magic reserve to lift the glider, which weighed over half a ton with its riders. It soared above trees, over the mountains, above the clouds, until they were surrounded by nothing but blue stretching around them. White clouds carpeted below them.

Rino cried in amazement. "Wow! It's beautiful!"

"We didn't really have time to take it all in when escaping the Elven Tomb." Shinichi glanced at the glider's wings. "How's it going, Regina?"

"As we pick up speed, we go higher. It's different, but I'm getting the hang of it."

She seemed to be getting a feel for the wings. Shinichi admired the apparent genius of the Blue Princess of War as he gazed into the sky ahead. The glider cut through the wind, heading to where the Red Dragon waited.

They took two breaks for meals before the glider arrived above the northernmost point of the continent. It had only been half a day. Since it was close to the North Pole, it was cold enough to make them shiver and keep the mountains capped with snow even in fall.

"Oooh. The mountains are very pretty, but it's chilly…"

"*Cold Protection*. How do you feel now?"

"All better. Thank you, Celes!"

"Dang it! I was a step late!" Sanctina chewed her nails in frustration, which Shinichi ignored, looking at the area below them.

"The map said it should be here…"

There was nothing obstructing their view, but he didn't spy anything resembling a red dragon.

"Maybe he's moved?"

Knowing they were grasping at straws, Shinichi was starting to succumb to despair, but something unnatural in the corner of his eyes caught his attention.

"What's that?"

A narrow valley. It looked like someone had sliced the mountains with a gigantic sword. A massive stone wall blocked off entrance to the area.

"Is it a dam? No. Castle walls?"

"Either way, it was made by somebody." Celes used *Telescope* to confirm.

It couldn't be a natural formation, since the wall was made of massive stacked stones.

"I thought this was a restricted zone, where no humans could live to see tomorrow?" asked Shinichi.

"I think it is…" Arian, staring at a fifteen-foot-tall caribou locked in a battle with a dinosaur-like bird of a similar size, didn't seem too confident.

She could see monsters dotting the ground—everything from a gigantic constricting worm to a treant. This had to be the rumored magic zone.

"I feel like I'm looking at the demon world. I feel at home," noted Regina.

"Meaning nothing but demons could live here." Shinichi was spent. "Was it built by demons on the surface?"

"I've never heard of the like. And why build a wall?" asked Celes.

"Hmmm…" Shinichi gave up on guessing. "Let's go check it out. There's a chance the Red Dragon is sleeping inside."

"Roger," Regina agreed happily, bringing the glider down to land near the valley.

Shinichi was relieved to see no monsters nearby as he disembarked to examine the stone wall.

"It's huge. I'm guessing 130 feet tall?"

It was twice as high and twice as thick as the walls surrounding Boar Kingdom. It could have been effective in warding off monsters, but Shinichi couldn't imagine the manpower necessary to build this thing.

“Seems hard to construct from raw power. Maybe they used magic…”

He was stepping closer to the wall when an iron spear plunged down, piercing the ground in front of him.

“Who’s there?!” Arian barked, immediately drawing her magic sword and leaping in front of him.

A silhouette appeared on top of the wall.

“Go back! No outsiders may enter here!” shouted the figure under a mask made from a beast’s head.

Other than their eyes, nothing was visible. The rest of their body was covered in furs to ward off the cold, giving them the appearance of a talking animal. The sight took Shinichi aback long enough to be surrounded by a similar group of people coming out of the shadows, pointing their iron spears.

“Ooh! A warm greeting.” Regina cracked her knuckles.

“Let’s see if we can settle this without our fists,” Shinichi suggested, holding his hands up to show they wouldn’t resist. “We’ll leave. But could you tell us what you know about the Red Dragon?”

“The Red Dragon?” The masked people reacted in surprise.

Seems like they know something.

Shinichi smiled inside while their apparent leader slid down the valley walls and walked up to them.

“What do you want from the Red Dragon?”

“We were hoping he could answer some questions.”

The man eyed them suspiciously…until he noticed the scarfed redhead.

“No way! Little Arian?!”

Arian almost jumped out of her skin. “Huh? How do you know my name?!”

The masked man seemed to take that as confirmation. His guard dropped completely.

“It’s you! You should’ve said so sooner.”

“Uh-huh…,” she replied, confused by his familiarity.

The masked group seemed to split into two reactions: those wondering who she was and those who knew.

“So you know Arian. Could you explain the situation?” asked Shinichi, unable to just watch.

The man seemed genuinely confused. “What? Aren’t you here because Brigit told you about everything?”

“And Brigit is…?”

“My mom.” Arian averted her gaze before turning to the masked man. “I’m sorry. She didn’t tell me anything.”

“Ah. She must have thought it’d spell trouble for us and kept quiet.”

“She got really sick three years ago and…”

“…I see. The world lost another life…” He nodded sadly, clasping his hands together to pray for her happiness in the afterlife.

“Why do you know about Arian and her mother?”

“Because she was born in our village, obviously.”

“What?!” Arian shouted.

“Oh, that makes sense.” Shinichi was satisfied with the explanation. “I was wondering: If the daughter of a dragon was born in a human village, why wouldn’t the church kill off mother and child?”

“There you go, speaking of the most horrific things,” jabbed Celes, but the masked man flashed Shinichi a look of surprise.

“You know Arian’s a half dragon?”

“Why else would I come searching for her dragon father?” He made it sound like it wasn’t a big deal, but the masked group let out little gasps.

“Did he say something strange?” asked Rino.

“Not sure,” replied Sanctina.

Arian was starting to wrap her head around the situation, as the tiniest memories of her childhood began to resurface.

“Everyone in this group knows I’m a half dragon, but we still get along. They’re…my friends,” she admitted with a grin, though her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

The man’s eyes crinkled into a smile. “Then you’re all fine.”

He removed his mask.

“…Hmm?” Arian was floored.

She’d assumed he was in his thirties based on the raw power behind his throw, but his face was creased with wrinkles. He was elderly: over sixty at least. But his age wasn’t the surprising part. His naked face was covered in animal-like fur. Small horns jutted from his forehead. The others unmasked themselves to reveal their beastly features.

“Are you demons…?” Arian whispered.

When none of her friends reacted with disgust, the leader smiled in relief and greeted them for real this time.

“Welcome to Mouse Village.”

They were led down a hidden bypass in the side of the valley, heading inside the stone walls.

There, they saw homes carved from the mountain stone and villagers working together to cut up a mammoth-shaped monster. It was like the early Stone Age…except these people had iron tools and used magic to create fire.

Rino gazed at the villagers before looking up at the elderly man, who’d introduced himself as the village chief.

“Um. Are you demons, too?”

Many of the villagers were covered in fur. Some had horns or tails. Others had beastly ears and wings. However, their faces and builds were definitely human. Not much seemed to indicate they were demons.

“What’s a demon? Is that what you call beast morphs?”

“Beast morph?”

“Uh-huh. That’s what we call babies that resemble beasts in appearance and strength. Everyone in this village is a beast morph. As are the children, naturally.” The village chief smiled.

“Um. Does that mean you’re humans?”

“Obviously. We can’t mate with animals, even if we look the part.”

“Chief! She’s too young to hear that!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Forgive me.” The village chief chuckled when one of the other villagers reprimanded him.

“So they’re humans who look like demons?” whispered Rino.

She was the only one in the group who didn’t realize that she, in fact, was a demon who looked like a human.

“Lord Shinichi, is…?” started Celes uncomfortably.

“It’s too early to say. We have no proof.”

But Shinichi was certain it was true.

Demons are…

He looked around at everyone’s faces. Regina was surprised, connecting the dots. Arian seemed unsettled, like she was on the same page, too. As for Sanctina…

“I just realized… Rino in cat ears would be groundbreaking.”

“I’m more of a dog-ear person.” Shinichi sighed in relief that she was the same.

The village chief wondered about their reactions but led them to his own home.

“Sorry for the mess. Take a seat.”

It was a basic dwelling, carved from the mountain. The only real furnishing was the animal pelts on the floor, which they sat on. The chief brought them cups of earthy tea, and they rested for a moment.

“I’m sure you want to catch up with Arian. But would you mind telling us about this village?” asked Shinichi.

“Mmm, yes. Let’s start there.”

“You said this was Mouse Village. Did survivors from Mouse City build this village? It’s a labor camp now.”

“Sure did.” The chief nodded.

Arian jumped up. “There were survivors from Mouse?!”

“Meaning there were beast morphs there?!” Sanctina cried at the revelation, but Shinichi had on his usual smile.

“Makes sense. It explains why Elazonia would destroy the city.”

“…You’re right,” said Sanctina.

The church’s holy book claimed that the city of Mouse was destroyed to save the world from evil. There were no details about what made it so “evil.” The working theory had been that it was crushed as a warning to neighboring countries that had rejected the Goddess’s words. That could still be true. But if it was home to beast morphs who resembled her hated

enemy, that would explain her motives behind slaughtering tens of thousands of people. Even if it did mean losing worshippers.

“You hit the nail on the head. Mouse was destroyed for its beast morphs,” agreed the chief, though he hadn’t been alive at the time to see it.

He’d grown up hearing stories passed down from his father and grandfather, mourning the lost lives, and reaffirming his hate for the Goddess.

“Mouse wasn’t like our village now. Beast morphs were a rarity.”

Bearing a beastly child triggered enough fear in people to want to kill them. Shinichi was willing to bet they were disposed of in other cities, pretending they were stillborn. Mouse was the exception, where children were called beast morphs and raised with love.

“After all, we’re very powerful.” The chief tore off a chunk of stone wall with his bare hands. Their strength matched their appearance.

“According to our ancestors, beast morphs were considered blessings.”

Mouse was the closest city to the restricted zone, meaning they were at higher risk for a monster attack coming from the Matteral Mountains. The beast morphs could fend them off with their inhuman strength and magic, preserving peace in Mouse—and making them “heroes” in the eyes of the people.

Then the church’s heroes from the south started to pick them apart.

“They started saying strange things: ‘All beast morphs are evil and deserve to be executed.’”

The people resisted. They had enough pride not to go against their real saviors. From a strategic standpoint, eliminating the beast morphs would mean losing their power as a city.

The people united and refused to comply. That was when Pope Eument drew on Elazonia’s power to cast the strongest light spell: *Solar Ruin*. It formed a massive lens in the sky, collecting the sun’s energy to scorch the land—clean energy weaponized for genocide.

It wasn’t a battle. It was a massacre.

“It wasn’t just the beast morphs. They incinerated indiscriminately.” The village chief looked anguished, imagining the bodies turning to ash.

“Murdering the innocent?! The church is the evil beast!” cried Sanctina.

“Save it,” snapped Shinichi.

She’d conveniently forgotten that she’d planned to use *Solar Ruin* to destroy the demons.

“And then the survivors built this village.” The chief forced himself to sound peppy, trying to dispel the dark vibe.

Though this was a magic zone where monsters ran rampant, it wasn’t all that challenging for the beast morphs to live here. Imminent danger kept outsiders from coming this way, which meant they didn’t need to worry about the church finding them. The chief broke into a grin because they led a pleasant life in the valley, and Shinichi smiled back, impressed by the chief’s people.

“You’re a brave bunch,” Shinichi noted.

“Couldn’t live here if we weren’t,” replied the chief, chuckling.

Shinichi broached the real topic of interest. “So where is the Red Dragon?”

“……” Arian’s mouth clamped down as she waited for the answer.

The chief looked serious and pointed to the north.

“You saw the tallest mountain in the area, right? That’s where he’s rumored to lie.”

“The tallest mountain…”

They had seen it when they were in the glider, but nothing resembled a dragon. The chief picked up on his skepticism.

“There’s no question about it. Brigit was the one who said so.”

“Mom…” Arian nodded, knowing this information was reliable.

“I’ve been wondering: Did Arian’s mom happen to be really strong?”

Based on the stories, Brigit had made her way through the restricted zone and found the Red Dragon. The chief seemed frustrated that Shinichi even needed to ask.

“Obviously. Brigit was the strongest of us all. In the two years between Arian’s birth and their departure, Brigit defeated more than three hundred monsters by herself.”

“*What?!*” Arian cried upon hearing this epic account.

Shinichi was more surprised by her reaction. “Didn’t you know?”

“No. I mean, she taught me to use a sword, since she told me ‘not being in control of your power is a danger to yourself.’ But I never thought it was out of the ordinary…”

While they traveled, Brigit would help farms and take up odd jobs to make a living, but she’d never done anything as dramatic as hunt monsters.

“A shame that her talent went to waste,” mused Regina, wishing they could have tussled once.

“I think it was to set an example for me.”

“You’re human. You’re a bit stronger than other people, but you’re human.”

Her mother used to console her when Arian had come home crying that she was different from the other children, cursed with her half-dragon body. But it also served as a reminder to control herself, because if she used her strength for her own gains, she would depart from “humanhood.” Arian realized her mother had been talking to herself, as her powers went beyond the average beast morph.

“I didn’t know anything about Mom…” Arian hung her head.

Why hadn’t she been able to see her for her?

Shinichi placed his hand on her shoulder, his smirk creeping across his face. “Come on. We’ll get your dad to cough it up, and then you’ll know everything.”

“…Yeah!” She beamed at him.

He stood up. “Thank you for the valuable information.”

“Leaving already?” asked the chief. He urged them to stay the night since the sun had already set. It was dangerous out there. Besides, they hadn’t talked enough about Brigit.

But Shinichi refused his offer, thanking him for his generosity. “We have urgent business.”

The chief could tell it was important. “…I see. I suppose I can’t stop you.”

Arian jumped in after a moment of hesitation. “Um…Can I come back and listen to more stories…once we sort everything out with Dad?”

There was no guarantee they’d be able to beat Goddess Elazonia, even if they did meet the Red Dragon. She promised to come back alive, *because* uncertainty hung over their heads.

He smiled from ear to ear. “You’re always welcome here.”

They left the chief’s home and passed back through the secret passageway to the front of the stone wall. They piled into the glider as the chief saw them off.

“Oh, right,” he suddenly said. “All of this—”

“Don’t worry. We’ll keep it a secret,” Shinichi assured him, guessing his request. “But I think the day will come when humans and beast morphs can live in harmony like before.”

“What?”

“I said we’re going to get revenge for your ancestors.”

With that, he closed the glider’s windshield and directed Regina to cast *Fly*.

“What did he mean by that…?” murmured the village chief, waving at the glider as it rose into the evening sky, stained red by the setting sun.

Their glider touched down on a summit high enough to remind Shinichi of the Himalayas.

“But where is he?” Shinichi thought out loud.

This was the location, but no dragon. Regina looked gleeful, laughing off his concern.

“Don’t think too hard. The Red Dragon is here,” she stated, pointing below their feet.

“Oh! Underground!”

“Yeah, I can feel magic from below us,” observed Arian.

“My skin is crawling. It’s like when I’m next to the Demon King,” agreed Sanctina.

“Which would explain why we couldn’t find him from the sky,” finished Shinichi.

Even he could feel the pressure below them if he closed his eyes and focused.

Regina prodded the ground with a cryptic expression. “Celes, what’s your guess?”

“…About three *capra* (six miles).”

“Hmm. That would be my guess, too.” She nodded, satisfied with her student’s answer. Regina took Shinichi’s hand. “Shall we pop under and meet the Red Dragon?”

“Uh. Please don’t tell me we’re going to *Teleport*!”

“Why not?”

“One misstep and we’ll be in solid stone! A classic ‘You are in Rock’ moment.”

He’d set up that death trap to get Ruzal and his party. Shinichi wasn’t about to get a taste of his own medicine.

“We don’t have another choice. Besides, I’ll cast a spell to get us back before I suffocate to death,” Regina reassured him.

“Well…you could *technically* do that in the game—”

“Unless we find ourselves in lava. Boom. Instant death,” added Celes.

“Stop trying to scare me!”

Rino listened to them bicker, face clouding over. “Are we all going to die?”

“Don’t worry, Rino. I will protect you—and only you. Come. Hold on to my chest. *Huff. Huff*,” Sanctina panted, securing the perfect opportunity.

“Beyond a brief handshake, touching is strictly prohibited,” sternly interjected Shinichi. “We don’t have time to tunnel down. There’s no other way. Do it.”

Regina puffed out her chest. “Leave it to me.”

Everyone linked hands to keep from getting separated. Regina focused on the mass of magical energy slumbering below the ground. “*Teleport.*”

Their vision warped. The mountains in sunset slipped into pitch-black darkness.

“Are we in stone—yow!”

After a moment of zero gravity, Shinichi crashed down on his butt. He realized this wasn’t a narrow space between rocks if they could free-fall.

“Did it work?”

“It would appear that way. *Light*.” Celes illuminated the dark.

Everything in their vision was red. Before them was a form as massive as a mountain, coated in red scales as big as a human palm. They sparkled like rubies and looked tougher than any metal. The creature’s eyes were closed, making no movements, as if dead. However, it released saturated magic waves, powerful enough to warp their sight. The creature was alone. It was one of the most powerful beings in the world: the Red Dragon.

“He’s here…”

“Ha-ha-ha! This is my final obstacle!” Regina bared her teeth in a big grin.

“Please, My Lady.” Celes rushed to restrain her teacher, who looked like she might launch an attack at any moment.

Arian took a step forward. “Dad?”

“……”

“It’s me, Arian! Brigit’s daughter!”

“……”

Arian called out, unwinding her scarf to show the red scales at the base of her throat. But the Red Dragon didn’t move a muscle.

“Dad…”

“Please excuse me for being rude. Are you sure that’s your father?” Celes asked.

She shook her head. “I know for a fact… My body feels hot, like it’s trying to tell me that we share blood.”

Her blue eyes had become tinted gold, pupils elongating into vertical slits like a reptile. They imagined she had the Red Dragon’s eyes, though his remained concealed by his eyelids.

“Dad! I have some questions for you! Open your eyes! Please!”

“……”

Arian clung to her father’s front leg, desperately calling out to him. But even then, his heavy eyelids remained shut.

Regina started rolling up her sleeves like she was losing her patience. “Seems I’ll have to force him awake.”

“Careful, My Lady.”

“Why?! You must understand. You’re a demon! Aren’t you dying to fight him?”

“I’m not that reckless.”

Regina sighed. “Pathetic. This is *exactly* why you haven’t gotten the boy to fall for you. I can hear your tits screaming at you to get to business.”

“…You’re right. I am a demon. Let me close your mouth with my fist.”

A dangerous battle was starting to unfold. The Red Dragon maintained its silence.

Shinichi walked up beside Arian and patted her slouched shoulder.

“Arian. Put yourself in your father’s shoes. You can’t blame him for pretending to sleep through this situation.”

“What?”

“Think about it. Some girl has just come up to you, claiming to be your daughter! Born from the woman that you haven’t heard from in seventeen years.”

“Oh…” Arian had been too excited to consider his feelings. “You’re right. Barging in puts him in a tough position.”

“He didn’t help raise you. He didn’t pay child support. He basically left you to fend for yourself for seventeen years. If he were a human, he’d be a deadbeat dad. How could he face you?”

It was harsh, but it was the truth.

Rino started to tear up. “Poor Arian…”

“Another reason why men are worthless!” declared Sanctina.

“……”

Even that insult wasn't enough to rouse the Red Dragon. But Shinichi caught his eyelids move a fraction of an inch.

Heh-heh-heh. Seems he can hear us. If this is enough to make him react, his psyche isn't all that different from ours.

Shinichi had prepared for the worst-case scenario: the Red Dragon in hibernation, which meant their ant-like voices would never reach him. But that didn't appear to be the case.

He chuckled to himself in relief. After all, he was the Demon King's advisor, an evil priest, and an orator who'd won against the immortal heroes. He might be a flea in the eyes of a dragon, but he was confident he could even win against a god in a verbal fight.

"Taking no responsibility after impregnating a woman? Means he's less than a man."

"……" The Red Dragon twitched.

"B-but I'm sure Dad had his reasons…"

"Come on, Arian. He's the Red Dragon: He could blow away a mountain with a little puff," Shinichi teased. "Are you implying he didn't have what it takes to satisfy a woman? Or his little feelings were *so* hurt when your mom ran away?"

"……" He twitched again—and then again once more.

Shinichi had chosen fighting words. Even Buddha would send him flying with a kick. The Red Dragon's eyelid started to spasm. Arian didn't seem to notice this at all, getting indignant at Shinichi's insults.

"Cut it out, Shinichi. I won't forgive you for bad-mouthing my dad!"

"You're such a good girl."

Shinichi was impressed Arian didn't resent her father—choosing to stand up for him even though they'd never met. However, it was starting to become clear that this wasn't going to cut it. It was time for his special weapon.

"Celes, I know you're in the middle of a fight, but could you cover Rino's eyes?"

"…Understood."

When she saw his plan, she disengaged and placed her hand over Rino's eyes—sulking the whole time.

"Hmm?"

"Sanctina. Cover her ears," Shinichi warned.

"Don't have to ask me twice."

"What are you doing?!" asked Rino.

Shinichi grabbed Arian's shoulders and pulled her tight.

"Sh-Shinichi?"

"……"

The following program is intended for mature audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.

Shinichi didn't say anything, bringing his face close to hers.

"Aaaah! ♥ "

A sensual cry rang through the dragon's den.

"Wh-what are you doing…? Ah!"

"Want me to stop?"

"No…but everyone is watching us…even my dad!"

"Don't worry. Their eyes are closed."

"B-but…! Ah! ♥ " Arian was starting to pant, accompanied by some moist splishing.

"Shinichi, I'm…"

Just when she was about to reach her limits—

"Vermin."

The Red Dragon lifted open its heavy eyelids. His voice rang in their minds.

Shinichi flew through the air like he'd been shot by an air cannon.

"Gaaah—!"

"Shinichi?!" Arian screeched.

His huge eyes observed her.

None of her clothing was out of place. There *was* some saliva glistening on her scales. Shinichi had just licked the sensitive scales on her neck. It wasn't as obscene as her sensual voice had suggested. But the dragon's eyes narrowed in anger.

"Sexual intercourse. Bad."

"I know it seemed dirty, but we weren't having sex or anything…," Arian explained weakly, but it did nothing to calm his wrath.

"Sensitivity. Touching. Sexual intercourse. Bad."

"Erm…"

She was having a difficult time piecing together his fragmented sentences. He must not have been used to talking.

Celes piped up. "Sex means touching sensitive areas on the body. It's not just to procreate. It's an act of trust. After all, you're exposing your weakness to your partner. I think he's trying to say that getting your scales touched is basically intercourse."

“Indeed.”

“How did you understand all that?”

Arian was a little jealous that the pervert could decode her father’s speech.

“If Shinichi licked my scales…”

“It was like you —ed in front of your own father.”

“AAAAAAAAAAH—!” Arian turned bright red, understanding the gravity of her actions.

“Dad! I didn’t mean—”

“I mean, I wouldn’t call it ‘sex,’ but it *was* raunchy,” said Sanctina.

“I would never let a human do that to me. In fact, I wouldn’t even let my husband,” added Regina.

Arian was getting roasted. “No!” she cried. “I’m not a pervert!”

She collapsed from sheer agony. No one delivered the final blow by correcting that she was actually a “lady in the streets, a pervert in the sheets.”

As Arian lay in a puddle of her tears, Celes removed her hands from Rino’s eyes and walked over to Shinichi.

“Heh-heh-heh. Operation ‘No, Daddy! Don’t Look’ was a raging success…”

He couldn’t even stand from the damage.

“Dirtiest strategy to date,” snapped Celes, shooting him a cold glare.

She used *Healing* on him anyway.

He guarded his balls, assuming she would aim for them like usual.

She surprised him by bringing her lips up to his ear.

“The back of my ears are sensitive.”

“What?”

“…I may be the adult here, but that doesn’t mean I’ll put up with everything.”

“Um. Noted.”

Shinichi was lost in her cute little pout. However, he jumped to his feet when he noticed the Red Dragon eyeing him to see if Shinichi was planning on cheating on his daughter with some other girl.

“Mr. Red Dragon, I’m sorry I used your daughter to disturb your rest. But I had to ask you something.”

If they couldn’t get information about Elazonia, they’d lose their chance to save the Demon King. That would spell the end for the other demons. That was why he stood in front of the Red Dragon now, even if it meant provoking him and getting himself killed.

“Who is the Goddess Elazonia? Where is she? And how can we beat her?”

He knew it was low of him to try and force this from the dragon with nothing to give in return.

However, he couldn’t stop himself from yelling. “If we don’t defeat her, neither the demons nor the humans will see the future. But my motivations aren’t that pure! I just can’t forgive her!”

She trampled on people’s memories, toyed with people’s lives, made Rino break down in tears, hurt Arian.

“I’m going to bring her down with my own hands—so the important people in my life can have fun!”

He would toss away his pride and shame to do whatever it took to accomplish that goal. He wasn’t a hero or a Demon King or a dragon. He was a puny human with an intellect that was crafty yet lacked restraint. That was the weapon in his arsenal to go against a god. He stood taller, staring into the massive eyes of the creature before him.

“……” For some time, he made no attempt to speak.

Were their pleas falling on deaf ears? Did he not want to lend his help? Did even a beast from the ancient world not know about Elazonia? They all watched the dragon, enduring feelings of despair dawning on them.

The dragon finally let out a resigned sigh.

“Link.”

In each’s mind’s eye, they saw themselves dotting the ground like ants from his perspective.

“What?! Are we looking through his eyes?” Rino glanced around.

The cave had appeared dim to them, but it was now encased in rainbow light.

“Are we…seeing magic?” asked Shinichi.

As they experienced these sensations for the first time, the Red Dragon seemed unruffled, raising his downward-facing palm.

“Search.”

A flood of information forced itself into their brains.

“Agh! It feels like my head’s going to split open…!”

“Red land of lava… Cool blue ocean…where the tiniest lives are born…”

“Hold on! Or you’ll get swallowed whole!” screamed Regina.

They tried to bear the headache, which was ten times worse than any kind of motion sickness. Memories of the past billion years pumped into their brains.

Hundreds of millions of years ago, small organisms started to grow in the oceans, which pushed together the islands to form the supercontinent. The creatures of the sea crawled onto the land, evolving into birds and mammals. Monkeys began walking on two legs, using tools and creating fire, eventually turning into recognizable humans.

“Woah! Did humans start off as monkeys?!”

Rino knew nothing of the evolutionary theory. The time lapse didn’t slow down.

They switched from using tools made from stone to bronze to iron. These developments weren’t too different on Shinichi’s home planet…except that magic users ruled this society. Many of the countries that collapsed had

established absolute monarchies where the ruling class enslaved everyone else.

“I had a feeling…”

The disparity between the two groups had been more pronounced in the past.

A thousand years passed. The human population exploded. Science was more advanced, granting power to normal people, leading to the abolition of slavery and the establishment of democratic societies. It was like mid-twentieth-century Earth.

Their perspective zoomed in on one person: a woman in her twenties with shoulder-length black hair. She gave the impression that she was intelligent but severe.

“Is that…?”

Nothing about her face and build tipped him off, but he recognized that expression—one that looked down on everyone else.

“Goddess Elazonia.”

They watched in shock as her life started to stream into their minds.

Anticum Empire: the country controlling the northeast section of the supercontinent.

Magic and science had come together in magicology.

Though the former featured a wide range of powers, it was unsustainable and influenced by the user’s talent. On the other hand, the latter could create machines to work without rest, greatly reducing the load on magic users.

Scientists were starting to discover explanations for gravity, the structure of atoms, and genetics, which expanded the scope of spells for magic users.

This combined field was boosting the spell casters and boasted the capability of dictating the country’s fate.

The elite gathered in the Magicology Department at the National Research Institute.

“Was it impossible to make war planes with propellers?”

“They’re easy to build but make large targets for *Homing Arrow*. They’re no match for mages trained in aerial warfare. It’s better to keep using bombers and transport aircrafts.”

“Hmm. And our experiments to absorb magic waves from livestock aren’t going well?”

“They don’t emit as much as humans, and our collection methods aren’t the best. If we figure it out, it will change our understanding of magic forever…”

Staff toiled over machines and designs in a research lab. It was protected with material barriers and magic to prevent information from leaking to foreign spies.

Everyone had the body of a supermodel. Their ears were long and pointed. Even the men were gorgeous enough to be mistaken for women. However, they weren't born that way.

"Professor, your hair. It's rainbow now."

"Isn't it nice? Average magic users can't even imagine making a color like this."

"Are your eyes bigger again? Don't you think it throws off your facial balance?"

"You're so uncool. They're all the rage these days."

The staff were taking a break in the cafeteria, fawning over each other to conceal their envy. To them, this wasn't just a competition of sexual appeal. It symbolized their status and magical abilities. As proof, they scoffed at a normal-eared employee huddled at the edge of the room.

"Ew. I swear my lunch tastes worse when I look at a short ear."

"Don't be so mean. It's not like they have a choice."

"Urgh…"

The staff member with no magic endured their jeers in silence.

The others could alter their appearance with *Shape Change*, which had been developed by medical sciences and biology. Elf ears had exploded in popularity—to distinguish them from non-magic users. In fact, they'd become mainstream.

It was common knowledge among magic users that short ears meant the person was too weak to use *Shape Change*, and a hunky body was a sign of a gym rat who lacked confidence in their own magical abilities.

Hence the reason men favored slender bodies. It didn't stop with their muscles and bones. They'd even begun adjusting their hormones. They told themselves they were the ones with real power since they could make themselves beautiful from the inside.

As a certain religious scientist had warned: "We may know more from the research of our predecessors, but that doesn't mean we know everything about the human body. We're too ignorant to be meddling with the great mystery of life created by God."

The magic users laughed off those cautionary words.

"We can bring back the dead. Aren't we already gods?"

No one knew the price of their egos and body modifications at the time. Their distant ancestors would suffer from a declining birth rate of male children.

"Wait a minute!" cried Celes, begging for a time out.

The Red Dragon paused the flow of memories.

Her voice trembled. “Were elves humans?”

“Yes.” He said it was an undeniable truth.

“Does that mean…I’m human…?” Celes looked at Shinichi’s face.

Regina patted her student’s shoulder. “Good for you. Now you know you don’t have to worry about carrying his babies.”

“““*BLERGH!*””” Shinichi, Celes, and Arian spat out.

“Wh-what are you talking about all of a sudden?!” cried Arian.

“If elves were humans, it means they can have children. Isn’t that good news?”

“NO!”

Arian had just lost her leg up.

Shinichi and Celes stared at each other uncomfortably, cheeks tinged red.

“…We’ll have to let Clarissa and the other light elves know,” he said.

“…Indeed.”

They weren’t sure if the light elves would accept that they used to be the same as the “inferior” species. However, it could be their last ray of hope, seeing as they were facing extinction.

Shinichi and Celes thought about the elves, continuing to look at each other.

Arian pouted. “Dad! Show us more!”

“…Understood.”

It left him feeling some type of way to see his daughter jealous, but he restarted the flow of memories.

The black-haired woman walked briskly down the corridor of the Magicology Department crowded by the long-eared elves. Her ears were short, but her face wasn’t bad, though it was nothing compared with the elves’ works of art. However, they didn’t sneer at her. Instead, their faces paled as they stepped back to let her pass.

That was because she was a genius, the pride of the Magicology Department, the most powerful magic user in the Anticum Empire: Doctor Elen Qunel.

“Professor, what does this mean?!” Elen shouted, storming into her superior’s office and slamming documents in front of him. “You’re out of your mind if you’re cutting funding for nuclear fusion research!”

“Are you sure you’re not the one who’s out of *your* mind?”

The head researcher of the department was sixty years old, but he looked like he was in his thirties due to *Shape Change*. His tired expression said Elen was a difficult employee, even if she was a talented one.

“If we can’t even control nuclear fission, how will we ever succeed in fusion? Our current thermal power plants are plenty for producing electricity—”

“Who said we’d be using it to produce electricity?” barked Elen, tapping the documents. “This is a weapon to destroy those damned dragons.”

“…Elen. You’re a scholar. Call them by their academic name: Proxies,” warned the professor, making her more indignant.

“Proxies? They don’t deserve a proper name. They’re gross lizards!”

“…Fine. Whatever.” The professor knew better than to start this argument. “So you’re saying you want to make a thermonuclear bomb?”

“Yes.”

“Like I’d ever approve that!” He raised his voice as his patience frayed. “It’s been thirty years since the last world war. We just finished reconstructing our respective homes. If we make a weapon of mass destruction, our neighboring countries would decide we’re a threat and band together to eliminate us. Even a child can understand the consequences!”

Elen was a genius magicologist. She didn’t need the professor to explain it to her. She already understood the aftermath, but she continued to push it.

“Sure. But humanity won’t survive if we don’t destroy the dragons.”

“That’s where I’m saying you’re wrong.”

His head was pounding, but he somehow managed to regain his composure.

“You claim dragons are our enemy, but they slumber in their territory. They’ve never killed a plant, let alone a human. All they do is absorb mana in the atmosphere to live. They’re no more a threat than a fly.”

However, she knew they could cause natural destruction more horrific than any earthquake or typhoon.

“Don’t you even know what would happen if we provoked them?”

“……” She was silent.

There were very few people who understood their power more than Elen. She’d read everything there was to read on the topic.

“Do you want the Anticum Empire to follow the footsteps of the Republic of Sentel?”

“Grr…!” Elen gritted her teeth, refusing to admit he was right.

“Sorry. May I?”

This time, Regina was asking to take a break.

“Is he referring the battle where the Republic of Sentel fought the Black Dragon?”

“Yes.” The beast nodded.

She clasped her hands together, practically begging. “Could we *please* see that?”

Opportunities to see the almighty Black Dragon were few and far between.

“…Understood.”

He hesitated a moment before streaming the memories of the “battle” between humans and dragons. It was a comedy that elicited no laughter.

There were five huge, dangerous areas on the supercontinent known as High-Density Magic Wave Regions.

The areas were restricted to the public since monsters ran rampant. Anyone but the best magic users would become monster bait in a matter of minutes. In the center of each of the restricted zones slept one of the five dragons—the source of it all.

All living things—humans, animals, plants—absorbed mana from the atmosphere to transform into magic. If it went beyond their total storage capacity, the excess was released from the body as a current. There was no difference between these waves and magical energy other than that the latter was released intentionally through spells and the former was naturally discharged.

When exposed to strong currents, living organisms experienced a boost in magic production in their bodies, which made them more able to withstand the surge in energy. That was how monsters were created.

Dragons emitted huge waves even while they slept, creating droves of monsters in a magic zone extending to a sixty-mile radius. It was only a matter of time before someone decided to try to destroy the source of magical beasts for access to swaths of untouched land and resources.

“We have suffered for too long from the Black Dragon’s monsters, but that is all about to come to an end. We’ll wipe disaster from the face of the earth and return the lands to humanity!”

Those were the words of the president of the Republic of Sentel, a military state located in the center of the supercontinent.

It was a declaration of war against the beast in the restricted zone to the north. Some citizens and those abroad called them foolish, but the majority of the population supported the plan. In fact, the military was flooded with volunteer recruits. As the president had noted in his speech, monsters flooded out from the restricted zone, bringing human suffering with them. The destruction of the Black Dragon was the answer to their prayers.

If they succeeded in apprehending their enemy—a “Proxy of the Planet” and one of the most powerful creatures in existence—it would prove the raw power of the Republic, showcasing their military power to other nations. They ran with the dream, mobilizing the entire military into the restricted zone.

“Forward! Take back our land!” The soldiers shouted, using guns and heavy artillery to blast away the monsters, cutting open a path to the Black Dragon. Before science invented firearms, the average non-magic user had

no way of defending against these Grim Reapers. But that power dynamic had been turned on its head.

“Ha-ha-ha! Looks like an old rag!”

A Gatling gun shot enough bullets to turn a massive wolf into Swiss cheese. The soldiers convulsed in laughter like they were intoxicated—by the finest invention that science had to offer. The magic users were drunk on power.

“Target confirmed. All units—advance!”

Equipped with six propellers, a massive transport airplane flew overhead, dispatching a load of mages trained in aerial warfare and carrying magic conductors. They made their way to the airspace above the Black Dragon, where they weaponized the magic stored in their conductors to cast a spell.

“Apport!”

Bombs falling from their hands—two thousand of them, specially shaped to pierce the armor of a tank—were pulled down by gravity, and detonated on the creature. The explosion was followed by a hail of bullets from the soldiers on the ground, leveling the lush forest in an instant. But the Black Dragon continued to sleep in the area raging with flames.

“Damn this beast…!”

“We knew this would happen. Let’s leave the rest to them.”

The mages gritted their teeth, returning to their transport and opening the sky above the battlefield. The space was filled by another vehicle carrying twenty top-class magic users. Working together, they put everything into a single spell before tossing a tiny golden orb toward the ground and rushing to evacuate the area.

It began with a theory from a scientist who proposed that all matter was energy. Industrious research had culminated in humanity’s greatest weapon: *Nuclear Blast*.

For a moment, the Black Dragon was engulfed in hellish flames.

They were livestreaming the event—from the mushroom cloud to the uprooted trees of the forest—to show the power of the Republic. The entire continent watched with bated breath as the dust settled…revealing the beast with all its scales in place, unscathed.

“That’s…the Proxy of the Planet…”

They knew what that name meant.

Two hundred years ago, a prominent arch-mage had traversed a deadly desert, reaching the sleeping White Dragon. Impressed by his efforts, the beast cracked open its eyes and answered his question: What are Proxies?

“Proxies execute the planet’s goals. Its only desire is to exist. If the planet subsists, we will never harm or help your people.”

That was the truth.

For proof, the beast presented a single white scale to the mage and teleported him back to his home. Though there were many tales of humans communicating with these creatures, this was the only story with any

evidence. It was where the academic name *Proxy* stemmed from, and it implied the Black Dragon had the power of the planet incarnate, which it had expressed to all of humanity without lifting a single finger.

"We'll never win…"

The soldiers trembled in dread as the creature opened its eyes for the first time.

They knew they were going to die.

They readied themselves, but the beast let out a huge yawn, as if to imply they were being too noisy, before casting *Tunnel*. The ravaged area disappeared, transforming into a bottomless pit.

The Black Dragon looked at the soldiers as if silently asking them "to play elsewhere," then dove into the hole, never to be seen again.

In the end, the dragon had disappeared from the restricted zone. Technically, it was a huge victory for the Republic of Sentel, but not one person boasted or called it that. After all, the Republic of Sentel collapsed within three weeks. They'd depleted all their resources on the battle, and the shell of former nation was conquered by another country in the blink of an eye.

This plot had been orchestrated by the neighboring nation all along. They were betting the dragon would suck the republic dry of resources. As proof of their plot, the president of the Republic of Sentel had been taken as a prisoner of war, only to enjoy a cushy life in his new country.

The only miscalculation was that other countries swarmed like hyenas to claim their own share of the vacant magic zone, which triggered a world war.

While the Black Dragon had attacked the terrain, not a single person had been harmed. On the other hand, the world war resulted in ten million deaths.

"Nice! The Black Dragon never lets me down!" Regina whooped.

Shinichi was visibly upset. "I guess humans act the same on every planet…"

They were always itching to test out their newest inventions. He sighed.

Sanctina looked grave. "These beasts are the source of monsters, huh…"

As the Saint, she had a past of wiping out monsters and helping the injured who'd encountered them. Even though she knew the creatures weren't intentionally malicious, she couldn't shake her bad association with them.

"That's…"

Arian wanted to cover for her dad, but she'd seen what monsters could do during her time as a hero. She couldn't bring herself to say something she didn't mean.

Shinichi observed something. “Not all monsters come from dragons. I’ve heard stories of monsters away from the restricted zones.”

“That’s right!” Arian smiled, but Sanctina still looked bitter.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that dragons make monsters.”

“Okay. Sure. But they’re like natural disasters. Complaining won’t change anything.”

Dragons carried out the desires of the planet, meaning their powers drew from its resources. No use came from objecting to earthquakes, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions. Their only real choice was to enact proper countermeasures.

“If you want to eliminate monsters, you could try killing every single plant and animal in the restricted zones. Without living organisms, there’s no way for monsters to exist in the first place.”

“That’s not very nice.” Rino pouted.

Shinichi smiled at her, assuring her it was a joke.

“I’ve heard of someone wiping out all the sparrows damaging their fields. That caused the population of grasshoppers to explode in the absence of their natural predator. In the end, the fields were still ravaged. Eliminating monsters would destroy the ecosystem, which could cause other issues.”

“Is that true? When I exterminated mosquitoes in the demon world, we had a significant drop in other bugs.” Celes cocked her head to the side.

“Which falls under ‘other issues.’”

Since mosquitoes were at the bottom of the food chain, there was little risk of their extinction triggering a surge of another species. In fact, there had been suggestions on Earth of eliminating them to prevent the spread of contagious diseases.

However, they had impacted other insects and small animals that fed on mosquitoes for prey.

“Well, monsters *are* a natural creation. We need to reduce their damage to allow humans to prosper—like clearing forests to create farms. But trying to wipe them out or picking a fight with the dragons is reckless.”

“I see your point.” Sanctina nodded.

It didn’t change the fact that monsters created trouble for her and humans, but she knew the consequences of going up against a dragon. Her only choice was to accept the natural order of things.

Shinichi looked up at the beast.

The end of the planet, huh?

They resembled Western dragons, though they were similar to their Eastern counterparts, which were considered natural phenomena.

The planet wants to exist…

All organic life—humans, plants, animals, demons, monsters—were of no value from the viewpoint of a planet.

But if they’re all its creations, they might serve some value, like cells in the epidermis.

Cells were constantly replaced with new ones. It was so miniscule a process that it didn't register in human minds. Maybe the planet wouldn't notice if a single species was gone.

Which would make someone from another world…a virus.

The Red Dragon didn't exhibit any behavior indicating a need to eliminate him, even though he threatened to change the makeup of the planet.

If I posed a real threat, I'm sure I would have disintegrated into dust as soon as I was summoned…

Which meant someone like Shinichi was insignificant. Either that or he was beneficial for the planet's development.

Well, that's just my ego talking. He chuckled at himself.

A different question popped into his mind—about the demons, who lagged behind humans in technology and culture because they had magic.

How could the Blue Demon King have the genius idea of summoning someone from another world? How could he cross dimensional barriers? That had to be more difficult than creating a thermonuclear bomb, even if he was almighty.

Shinichi had done his research. He couldn't find another person in all of history who had been successfully summoned from a different world.

Who could say there wasn't some divine intervention by a higher being? By the planet's desires?

"……" Shinichi stared silently at the Red Dragon, but there came no answer.

"What's wrong?" asked Arian.

"Nothing." He shook his head as she scrutinized his face. "Anyway, could you show me the idiot who picked a fight with the dragons?"

"Yes."

The beast nodded, shifting their focus away from the Republic of Sentel and back to the genius magicology researcher, Elen Qunel.

"It's foolish to develop a thermonuclear bomb and risk another world war just to engage in an impossible fight. Give it up," reprimanded the professor.

His argument was reasonable. He shoved the documents back at her.

Elen narrowed her eyes. "Who says it's impossible? If *Nuclear Blast* doesn't work, we make a nuclear bomb. If that fails, we try an antimatter bomb. We need to test every possible option to annihilate the dragons!"

"Are you out of your mind? Let's say the experiment is a success. It would leave the planet in smithereens!"

"Then we'll make spaceships and leave." She didn't take her eyes off him.

If planetary destruction was collateral, so be it.

“We won’t survive without exterminating them.”

She was starting to scare him.

The professor sighed. “Your suggestions are absurd. We can’t let the monsters threaten us…but if we increase access to guns, normal people can —”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” Elen shrieked, slamming her hands on the desk. “I couldn’t care less about unintelligent monsters. The problem is those *mutants* committing crimes with their humanoid intelligence!”

“Elen. That’s offensive. They’re victims of magic waves—”

“They are not *victims*!” she screeched, almost bursting a vein in the process. “They intentionally go into the restricted zones to get power, soaking up the dragon’s magic and abandoning their human forms. What else do you want me to call them?!”

She tossed more documents on the desk. Some of the photographs blew into the air, displaying pictures of these “mutants.” A man with long claws, a woman with horns, a child covered in fur. They looked like they’d fused with beasts. He couldn’t deny that they appeared mutated.

They were victims—human-turned-monster.

“You know they commit tens of thousands of crimes each year!”

“Because of their circumstances…” The professor weakly tried to defend them.

It could be attributed to their corrupt magical society.

It was widely known that even people born with weak magical powers could improve their internal production system by exposure therapy. There were even parents who would pay obscene amounts of money to powerful mages to work on their children.

Magic was the key to success.

In the military, those with strong magical powers were guaranteed an officer rank. In corporate life, they were indispensable for business meetings, because they could use *Liar Detector* and *Mind Reading*. If they were strong enough to use *Teleport*, they made a living working in the transportation industry.

The rich got richer through magic. The poor got poorer with no magic.

The power hierarchy was irreversible, the real problem gnawing away at the magical society.

“Don’t you think it’s normal for the disenfranchised to want more power?”

“That doesn’t mean we can forgive their crimes!” shouted Elen.

There was one way for those at the bottom to crawl to the top: to enter a restricted zone, survive the monsters, and expose themselves to the dragon’s magic, which was stronger than any human. A few days of exposure was enough to throw the victim’s internal production into overdrive, giving them magic that surpassed an average magic user.

However, the sudden surge of magic triggered the body to change—kicking it into survival mode. The body desperately wanted to become stronger to withstand the energy.

Their new magic altered their bodies to match their imagination. Many drew inspiration from tigers and bears, while others turned to devilish creatures, giants, or even dragons.

This gave birth to victims—those who lost touch with their human forms and hearts.

That was the price of magic.

"I know there are 'real' victims exposed to wave currents against their will. But the vast majority do it for power—and use it for evil!"

"……"

The professor didn't respond to Elen's angry protests. She wasn't wrong.

It seemed they had traded power for their conscience.

Many victims had come from cycles of poverty, trodden on and mistreated their entire lives, and now ready to get revenge. That was why they were referred to as *mutants* and feared more than monsters.

They had only recently reestablished them as "victims of magic waves" as human rights came to the forefront.

"Now they've formed terrorist organizations and aim to overthrow the empire!"

"Only some of them. Others have contributed to the empire as soldiers or researchers. To lump them in—"

"That's irrelevant. They should all be destroyed along with the dragons!"

If Elen had been a politician, this could have destroyed her career.

But even the "good" citizens would agree with her sentiments.

These victims didn't just possess magic. They had claws and fangs to rip through skin, scales and shells to repel bullets—superhuman strength. Paired with human intelligence, they could wield swords, guns, and spells.

The average person stood no chance.

That had inspired the creation of a secret society aiming for their annihilation.

They were locked in a perpetual battle, trying to wash away past blood with new.

"So what if they helped us in the world war thirty years ago? You know they just keep reproducing—coddled by performative assholes talking about human rights! If this continues, they will destroy humanity!"

"That's not the way to put it. They are just as human as—"

"They're not human!" shrieked Elen, unleashing her full wrath. "They're obsessed with magic and abandoned their humanity. They are something else! They are 'demons'!"

Elen wasn't the first one to call them that.

It was the name that the victims were using for themselves. They weren't 'frail humans' or 'brainless monsters.' They were a new, advanced race with brains and brawn.

Aspirational usurpers had started to push that “demons should control the world,” and “humanity should evolve into demons.”

“We must exterminate the demons and destroy their source—the dragons. That’s the only way to save humanity!”

Rino was floored. Elen’s declaration, dripping with hate, rang in her mind.

“Demons used to be humans, too…”

“That means we can have children!” cried Sanctina.

“No, it doesn’t,” retorted Shinichi.

Arian tried to compose herself. He seemed far too calm about this bombshell.

“When did you figure it out, Shinichi?”

“Probably around when I met you.”

“Really?!”

The possibility had only crossed her mind when she saw the beast morphs in Mouse Village.

Shinichi started to explain slowly. “There are so many different types of demons, from orcs to harpies. They’re all as smart as humans. They can all talk. They have their respective cultures. That’s already strange.”

“Is it?” asked Celes, tilting her head to the side.

It seemed perfectly normal to her. After all, she had been born and raised in the demon world. It was common knowledge that there were many species of demon.

However, Shinichi was from Earth, which had exactly one intelligent race. Only he would think this was peculiar.

“Their mental faculties were just a small clue. I started to question everything when I suspected the pig was turning into a monster.”

He was talking about the pig intended for slaughter, which had ended up becoming their little pet. Since it was surrounded by demons, it was exposed to magic around the clock and transformed into a seven-foot pig as a result.

“I asked myself: ‘What would happen if a human turned into a monster?’ That’s when I hypothesized it would be a demon.”

“I see.”

“And then there was the thing with Rino.”

“Me?”

Shinichi examined her from her head to her toes: luscious locks of black hair, contrasting white skin, ruby eyes. Nothing gave her away as a demon, aside from her devilishly good looks.

Beginning with their journey to Tigris Kingdom, no one had suspected her true identity, even without altering her appearance.

“You’re the daughter of the Demon King, but you look like a human. I started to wonder why.”

“I never questioned it since this kind of thing happens every once in a while…,” Regina said.

With the exception of her sapphire hair, she could also be mistaken for a human.

It might be attributed to atavism, where a lost ancestral gene reappeared in a new generation.

“I can’t believe elves and demons used to be like us…,” said Arian.

“Oh, the irony.”

Sanctina had broken into a crooked smile just imagining what would happen if the members of the Goddess’s church found out, since they were all about annihilating demons.

“Nothing would change,” Shinichi argued. “They’ve already drawn the line that they’re a different race.”

Even humans divided themselves into allies and enemies based on skin color and religion.

They couldn’t simply get rid of this distinction between the two species with different appearances and powers.

“But people don’t have to fight just because they’re different.”

They’d managed to become friends with the captain in Tigris Kingdom. They’d even developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the Holy Mother.

So what if humans and demons were different? They could work together to find a path that didn’t result in bloodshed.

“That’s why we need to get rid of this demon hater.”

Shinichi was hostile toward Elen, who would later become known as the Goddess Elazonia.

Rino looked up at his face. “Why does Elen hate us?”

Her argument was that demons weaponized their power, making them a danger to society, but there was no reason to sacrifice everything for their defeat—whether it was contaminating large swaths of land with radiation, using nuclear weapons, or annihilating the entire planet with antimatter. The level of her animosity made no sense.

“If my ancestors hurt her, I want to say sorry…”

Rino hoped it would put a stop to their fighting and help them become friends.

She begged him with puffy eyes.

“Even though she killed Fey?” he asked.

“—Ngh?!”

That almost gouged her heart out. She averted her gaze for a moment, before turning back to face him.

“I can never forgive her for that…but I don’t think we can solve anything by hurting each other and trying to get revenge.”

“You’re right.” Shinichi smiled and stroked her hair.

There were only two ways to stop war: destroying the other side and putting aside differences to forgive.

Shinichi found it commendable that Rino had the strength to forgive Elazonia even though she'd killed her friend and captured her father. However, it didn't mean it was enough for everyone to reflect on their ways, even if she had changed Sanctina for the better.

Well, that's what I'm here for.

That was his role. Shinichi looked up at the Red Dragon.

He seemed to guess what Shinichi was hinting at, because he resumed the memories of the fight between the professor and Elen.

A new character appeared.

"E-excuse me, Elen…"

Someone nervously tried to step between the two.

It was a baby-faced girl with glasses…

"Fey?!" cried Rino.

"Must be the original Fey."

He noted her pointy eyes. She seemed a little older, too.

As everyone reeled back from shock, seeing Fey convinced them to stop arguing.

Elen had to take one last jab.

"If you don't approve my research on nuclear fusion, I'll go to another country."

She stormed out of the Magicology Department, stomping all the way home and trudging into her bathroom, where she began to undress.

"Don't look! Shinichi!" cried Arian.

"Um. Covering my eyes won't work. I'm seeing this in my mind's eye."

"Should I remove your brain?" Celes suggested.

"Do you want me to die?"

Arian had clamped her hands over his eyes. Celes latched on to his head. It didn't stop him from watching Elen take a shower.

As soon as he saw her naked body, every dirty thought vanished into thin air, replaced by shock.

"No way! Are those—?!"

Her chest was covered in blue pentagonal shapes.

Dragon scales.

"Was the Goddess Elazonia a half dragon?!"

"No relation."

The Red Dragon immediately shot down his guess.

"Does that mean she's a demon with scales like a dragon?"

"Correct."

Shinichi looked at Regina, the Blue Princess of War, a woman with great magic. Her transcendent blue hair was the only thing that set her apart from a human.

What was so strange about a demon of the same caliber with scales on her chest?

"Hmph. So El-something-or-other is a demon just like us," observed Regina.

“If this gets out, it’ll be chaos.”

Sanctina started to sweat, knowing this could shake the foundations of the church.

Rino was visibly confused. “Why does she hate demons if she is one?”

She just couldn’t wrap her head around someone plotting to annihilate demons as their kin.

Rino had been raised with love by her own race. That didn’t mean there weren’t others who had been hurt by their own people, causing them to wish for their destruction.

“…Could we see the answer?” asked Shinichi.

“Yes.”

The boy sighed, guessing it would be a dismal one.

The Red Dragon went further back in time to locate the first scene of her tragic tale.

The eastern side of the supercontinent contained the world’s largest lake.

Young Elen and her parents paddled across the water in an old-fashioned boat.

She didn’t look excited by the excursion. In fact, her face showed pure terror.

“Mommy, let’s go home!”

Elen clung to her mother’s arm, eyes locked on something in the lake. Under them were fish larger than killer whales, tearing each other apart in red water.

“We’re going to die!”

“Don’t worry, Elen. You’ll get used to them.”

“Your mother is right. You’re going to be stronger than those monsters.”

The parents tried to comfort their terrified daughter. Their eyes were dark and clouded, like the water in a marsh.

This lake was home to monsters; it was known as a restricted zone.

Far below, in the depths of the lake, slumbered one of the five Proxies, the Blue Dragon. Its saturated magic waves morphed all living creatures in the lake into monsters.

They couldn’t sink their teeth through the steel hull of the boat since they were just organisms, after all. The pilot swatted oncoming monsters with the steel bow, sometimes directing the crew to use cannons or water mines. They came to a stop in the middle of the lake, above the slumbering Blue Dragon.

This was as close to one as they could get. The Red Proxy was deep within the mountains. The White Dragon across a deadly desert. This was the best location for humans to expose themselves to magic waves.

Strange things started happening to Elen’s body after half a day.

“Ah! Agh!”

She felt hot, like her entire body was on fire. She thought her head and chest would split in two.

“I’m going to die… Mommy! Daddy!” Elen desperately cried out.

Her parents gave her water and liquid food, smiling the entire time.

“It’s all right. This is a necessary part of your evolution.”

“No pain, no gain. It means you’re going to be blessed by great power.”

They were whispering things that were beyond her. Elen suffered through the fever and pain.

After a few days, she was noticeably thinner and exhausted, but her condition had stabilized slightly. Her father carried her in his arms to a large open area below the decks. There were children who had been transformed like her.

“Wow, I’m a tiger! Roar!”

“Oh look, Kyle. You’re a weretiger now. Very cool.”

“Mommy, I have wings now!”

“A harpy. You’ve achieved your dreams of becoming a pilot and flying through the sky.”

The parents of the mutated children showered them with praise. Elen trembled in fear looking at this unholy gathering.

“What are they…?”

Elen couldn’t understand why they would be happy in their beastly bodies, only because she had never been abused by the magic users.

“We didn’t want you to go through what we did, Elen.”

“We didn’t want them to look down on you just because you can’t use magic.”

Heartbroken, her parents remembered their own pasts. They had been born without magic, which instantly labeled them as “inept.” Born to poor parents, they never had a way to climb the social ladder. All they had known was living under the heavy boots of magic users, ground to bits.

“I’d get a ninety on a test after hours of studying, while a magic user would use *Speed Learning* to whiz through the information in minutes and score a hundred. Don’t you think that’s unfair?”

“I struggled to graduate college only to work for a high school dropout. Wouldn’t you hate to bossed around by a magic user?”

“I remember when this old wench stole my boyfriend using *Shape Change*. I was so heartbroken; I couldn’t sleep for days.”

“I wanted to murder the rich magic user who got between me and my girlfriend.”

Thirty years of this treatment. They’d forgotten they were in front of their daughter as they cursed them out.

All the parents on the boat had been beaten down in the same way. That was why they wanted to put their children on the side of the abusers. They were giving them the gift of magic—failing to ask for consent…and consider the risks.

“‘All right, Elen. Let’s get revenge when you’re a demon, too!’”

Her parents’ faces had morphed, transformed by saturated magic.

Their skin peeled into crackling scales. Their eyes bulged out of their heads. Their tongues had split down the middle.

They were turning into snake people.

It was like their dark envy had seeped out. Everything about them was wretched and ugly.

“N-nooooo—!”

A bloodcurdling scream welled up from her soul.

There was one thing her parents hadn’t known. Even though Elen was their child, she herself had been blessed with hidden potential to become a magic user.

The ugly ducklings had given birth to a swan, who was now transforming from the magic waves of the Blue Dragon.

“Get awaaaaay—!”

She couldn’t bear the idea of becoming an ugly mutant. She didn’t want to become anything like her pathetic parents.

As those thoughts filled her mind, the magic inside her awakened.

Lightning Vortex.

A storm of white lightning incinerated the wretched beasts, granting her wish.

When she processed the situation, everything was charred black. She was the only living thing there.

“Mommy…Daddy…”

Elen trembled at this unintentional devastation, then burst into laughter.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Their fault for making me do that! They got what they deserved!”

She couldn’t tell if she was trying to shake off the guilt of committing parricide or if this was her true nature. Either way, Elen almost choked from laughter before noticing the pain in her chest.

“What…is this…?”

Under her nails, she found blue scales glittering against her skin like sapphires.

If the ashen parents were still alive, they would have rejoiced, saying she was a chosen child of the Blue Dragon. But that wasn’t how Elen saw it.

Her parents had marked her with proof that she was a wretched demon, the final curse of the snake people.

“No! Noooo—!”

Elen scratched at her chest, tearing off her bloody nails, but it made no difference to the permanent curse on her body.

Elen had slaughtered the entire crew without knowing they had been instructed by the rebel group of demons to find potential fighters.

She used her new magic to take to the sky, leaving behind the Blue Dragon’s lake and returning to civilization, where she was taken in by an orphanage and matured as a magic user.

“Elen, you make us so proud,” said the head of the orphanage.

Upon request, she had been given her own room and anything she needed to further her studies.

A powerful magic user was a national treasure that could influence the future of the country. Elen knew they were showing favoritism for their own self-interests, but it worked to her advantage. After all, her real parents had only loved her for their own gain. Unconditional love was foreign to her.

But that didn't mean she wanted love any less.

During the summer of her second year of high school, Elen confessed her love to her math teacher.

"I love you."

"Y-yeah, me too…"

Her candor caused the plain teacher to blush.

This might have been the beginning of the happiest time in Elen's life, even though they had to keep it secret.

"Look at my body."

Elen thought her heart was going to burst from her chest. Her teacher had invited her to his room a few months after their relationship started.

She'd removed her clothing.

"You're so beautiful, Elen."

He couldn't hide his excitement, staring at her naked body.

He reached out to her.

Elen smiled a little at his reaction. *"Dispel."*

She removed the spell that concealed those markings on her chest from the day she'd killed her parents. The illusion melted away. Her supple skin hardened into blue dragon scales. Her teacher went stiff, yanking his hand back.

"Ah! …Elen! Are you a demon?!"

He was scared of her violent species. But it started to dawn on him: She'd always had magic far beyond a normal human.

Elen didn't let him see the sadness creeping into her heart.

All the men she'd loved reacted this way: the boy in her class in elementary school, the older student in middle school, and now him.

"Kiss me."

Elen leaned toward her teacher, bringing her scaly chest instead of her lips near his face.

If only he could love her for her detestable scales. Then she might be able to live as a normal girl, resolving the resentment that she felt for becoming a demon.

"T-teachers shouldn't be involved with students, I think!"

He turned his face away, pushing Elen away by her shoulders.

"…You're just like the others."

Like the two boys, he was rejecting her once he knew what she really was.

"Good-bye."

And just like she had in the past, she bid him farewell before bringing punishment down on the traitor.

“Return to atomic dust. *Disintegrate*.”

“W-wai—”

Without time to try and explain himself, her teacher was engulfed by magical light. The bonds between atoms began to unlink, decomposing his body into white dust. Elen used *Telekinesis* to clean it up, dump it in the toilet, and flush it away. There was no physical evidence of his murder; Elen was very careful. She erased every last trace of him.

“Uninstall.”

The spell altered the neurons in her brain, eliminating all her sweet thoughts about him and their happy memories. In her mind, he was nothing more than her teacher. Even if the police questioned their relationship, she’d pass *Liar Detector* with flying colors.

That was how she’d always done it. She’d erased every uncomfortable memory of murdering her boyfriends and parents. But even with her blank slate, she could never forget the blue scales on her chest, reminding her that an ugly demon could never be loved.

“Destroy it.”

Destroy the nasty demons, their dragon creator, a world where no one loved her.

“I will wipe everything out.”

Even if she expunged every painful memory, she couldn’t delete the hatred that festered in her heart.

She might get rid of the memories every time she was rejected and hurt, but the hatred still festered in her heart even if she’d forgotten the reason. At some point, she had stopped wishing it would go away and had started to imagine destroying it herself.

Her wish came true. It wasn’t from her curses—but the calamity, the asteroid crashing into the planet.

Everyone in the cave was silent when they learned about her heartbreaking start in life. Rino was the only one crying.

“Poor Elen… Treated horribly by her mommy and daddy and crushes…”

“I can sympathize a little.” Shinichi stroked her hair with a grave expression. “But that doesn’t make it all right to kill people.”

One could argue that her parents got what they deserved since they turned her into a demon without her consent, but the other children by the lake hadn’t done anything wrong. Even the men who rejected her didn’t deserve to die.

“Demon culture permits murdering the weak to assert dominance.”

He didn’t say it was a bad thing. It was impossible to judge a culture by his own standards.

However, as an active participant of society, it was wrong to infringe on the rights of others, whether by stealing from them, violating them, or killing them. Elen seemed to murder her partners because she knew she wouldn't be found out.

"She hates who she is except when she can use it to her advantage. Can't have your cake and eat it, too."

"A prime example of a psychopath," said Sanctina.

"You're one to talk," Shinichi shot back, annoyed.

Meanwhile, Arian's expression went dark as she touched the scales on her neck.

"…But I can understand how she feels."

The scales on her neck proved she was abnormal. She was thinking about her childhood. When people caught a glimpse of them, they had recoiled, pelting her with rocks. These memories were always in the corner of her mind.

"If I didn't have my mom's support…if I hadn't met Shinichi…I might have turned out like her…"

The only thing stopping her from becoming a monster was friends. They accepted her for her, keeping her from becoming violent with rage.

However, Elen's parents and boyfriends had turned their backs on her, leaving her with no support system. Arian shuddered, trying to imagine her pain and loneliness.

"Oh no… I can't bring myself to hate Elen!"

Arian had an obligation to defeat this enemy—and found herself unable to raise her sword against her.

Shinichi gripped her shoulders. "No need to make yourself despise her. I didn't destroy the heroes out of hatred."

The church and its heroes had their own sense of justice. It just happened to be contrary to Shinichi's belief that demons should be protected. That had initiated their fight.

"Now we know why Elazonia hates the demons. But we need to take her down because we don't want her to destroy them. And that's enough of a reason."

"…Yeah." Arian tried to accept his logic even though she wasn't entirely convinced.

Regina watched them with a sympathetic look. "As a woman, I feel a certain amount of sympathy for Elen. She might not have become so bitter if she'd met a man who liked her for her scales."

"She's got rotten luck with men."

If only she'd met a kinky pervert who loved to see her squirm in embarrassment over her scales!

"She should have taken a page out of the Demon King's book and summoned someone from another world who could love her," said Shinichi in frustration.

“Wouldn’t that summon you?” Regina clapped like she’d had a stroke of genius. “How about you use your skills to seduce her?”

“I’m not some honeypot!”

“”……””

Shinichi could deny it, but it wouldn’t scrub off the glares on Arian’s and Celes’s faces.

He turned away.

Rino gently tugged on his sleeve. “Shinichi, can’t we become friends with Elen?”

“……” He thought about that for a moment before shaking his head. “It might work if we were dealing with Elen, but this is Elazonia we’re talking about.”

These detailed memories of her past cemented his answer. There were no doubts that Elen had become the Goddess, but there was one difference that set them apart.

“I don’t know how to explain it… Elazonia seemed colder. I didn’t feel any life from her…”

If Elen was as passionate as fire, Elazonia was contemptuous as ice. Though they shared a common goal, their emotional responses were worlds apart.

“When did that change?”

Humans reinvented themselves beyond recognition from childhood to adulthood to retirement. It wasn’t all that strange to think Elen the human would become Goddess Elazonia over the thousands of years since the ancient civilization.

Even so, Shinichi had questions.

“Why did she become Elazonia?”

“Understood.”

The Red Dragon turned to the memories at the end of the ancient civilization to unearth the final piece of the puzzle: how a human becomes a god.

An asteroid was going to collide with the planet and leave it in smithereens.

It wasn’t like humanity waited around for doomsday after the astronomers discovered this. There were plans around the world to destroy the meteor before collision or change its trajectory. In the end, they had reached a point of despair.

“So there’s no way a rocket can get close to the asteroid?” asked the professor of the Magicology Department.

Everyone nodded.

“If we select the best mages from the world and obtain the purest magic conductors available, we might be able to break away from gravity and get

to the asteroid. The problem is they wouldn't have any magic left to destroy it."

"So it is impossible. If only we'd focused on space technology…"

He knew it was pointless to regret this now.

There was one simple reason they couldn't make a spaceship, even when they could bring back the dead. Magic users were powerless in space. To be precise, casting spells was possible. However, there was no mana in the air to regenerate magic. From living testimony of mages in space, they knew there was less mana in higher altitudes, like oxygen.

Basically, mana only existed within the atmosphere—not in space. In other words, it was generated by the planet. Without air, mages had no value.

"If only we could make a rocket with pure science to break away from the gravitational pull…"

Then, they could reserve their magic stores. They could close in on the asteroid and use *Tunnel* to prepare for *Nuclear Blast*, which would demolish it into little chunks.

In a society ruled by magic users, it was near impossible to get approval for a budget on something that didn't involve magic, including space exploration. Some researchers tried to get funding by pretending they were experimenting with a new type of missile, but all requests were denied, seeing these proposed weapons could be shot down by a homing missile.

That was why they hadn't even researched rocket engines.

"Our dependence on magic came back to haunt us…"

It was almost ironic that they were going to be physically crushed by an asteroid as they struggled to make use of their earthbound weapon—magic.

"Dammit! Why can't you give humanity a little more time, God?!"

Even though the professor didn't believe in a higher power, he found himself angry at God.

Though magicology was intended to increase the utility of mages, it had advanced some scientific discoveries as well. In another fifty years, they could probably invent a spaceship or find another way to live through the asteroid's impact.

He hung his head in despair when another staff member suddenly burst into the room.

"We've got a problem. Magic-wave victims are apparently flocking toward the hole made by the Black Dragon!"

"What?! Do they think they'll be safe underground?"

That was foolish!

Created by the Black Proxy during the incident with the Republic of Sentel, the cavity occupied the middle of the supercontinent, tunneling deep enough to fit four times the height of the world's tallest mountain.

They might be able to survive through the initial impact and consequent natural disasters, but the collision would kick up dust to block out the sun,

causing an extended winter. This would lead to food shortages…and ultimately their death.

“I would rather get crushed by the asteroid than descend into a man-eat-man world…”

The professor felt sorry for their stupidity.

The staff member held out a single piece of paper. “Actually, there’s someone leading the magic-wave victims. This is her…”

“A woman with blue hair? I’ve never seen her before… Wh-what’s this?!” He took a hard look at the numbers next to the photo. Blood drained from his face. “Her magic waves are immeasurable?! And they exceed one million units?!”

These wave currents served as a good indicator for the strength of individual magic. The average mage scored one hundred. Elen from the Magicology Department could get to one thousand. Not even she could reach ten thousand units, though she stood at the pinnacle of human capacity.

Only five beings on this planet tested at immeasurable amounts.

“Is she the Blue Dragon…?”

“There have been reports that the Proxy has disappeared from its lake.”

The professor couldn’t believe his ears.

It was difficult to categorize the Proxies of the Planet as living organisms, since they were closer to magic-producing furnaces. It seemed they were shaped like dragons, and though it was unclear if this was their true form, it was hard to believe they could take the shape of a puny human.

His jaw didn’t drop because the Blue Dragon had taken this form. He couldn’t believe she was trying to save them.

“I thought the Proxies didn’t meddle with human affairs…?”

According to the White Dragon at least.

Until this moment, none of the Proxies had attempted to do anything—even when thousands of humans were incinerated from lava or murdered in war, even when the ecosystem suffered from land development and pollution.

The only exception was the Black Dragon, who had tunneled into the ground during the incident with the Republic of Sentel. There was a joke that the five dragons would only move if aliens came to destroy the planet.

It was near impossible to believe one of them was trying to save magic-wave victims.

“Will the collision be so bad that even the Proxies felt the need to do something? Or is this unrelated to the planet’s wishes?”

It didn’t seem all too impossible.

The White Dragon had revealed their purpose to the arch-mage. The Black Dragon had dug a hole for sound sleep.

These actions seemed unrelated to the planet’s wishes. It seemed they could call on their own desires.

There was a distinct possibility the Blue Dragon was merciful, trying to save humanity from extinction out of the kindness of her heart.

“I don’t think it could be that simple… But it’s worth hedging our bets.” The professor started to give his staff member orders. “Tell the emperor. Ask him to notify the people that they may have a chance of surviving the collision—if they follow this woman who we believe to be the Blue Proxy.”

“But she’s leading a group of magic-wave victims. I’m not sure the average person will want to get close out of fear for their life…”

“That may be true. But they need to make an informed decision. It doesn’t need to be an imperial order. I just want the civilians to have the option.”

The staff member expressed his disapproval, but the professor managed to persuade him to change his mind.

A one-in-a-million chance was better than none.

One more survivor was better than none.

“Not everyone will be able to evacuate to the shelter,” added the professor.

“…True.”

They looked grave.

As soon as they came to the conclusion that nothing would stop the collision, they had rushed to construct an underground shelter with other mages—for the top 1 percent of the world’s population.

Even now, the 99 percent were protesting in the streets. They weren’t going to wait for the asteroid to turn the city into hell.

“Pathetic. Even if we can survive the natural disasters, there’s no guarantee we’ll live out the long winter…”

“But we all want to live longer—even if it means one more second. That’s what makes us human.” The staff member averted his eyes in guilt as one of the few who had the right to use the shelter.

“That’s exactly why I want people to know about hope…in the form of the Blue Proxy.”

“Understood.” He rushed from the room to act on the professor’s orders.

That decision would result in large swaths of normal people fleeing underground, forming a civilization that would later be called the demon world.

Bathed in the magic waves of the Blue Dragon—the sun of the demon world—they would turn into demons. But they would survive.

Some of the mages with elf ears would accompany them in this descent. Their exposure to magic would darken their skin. They would be called dark elves.

At the time, the future was unknown.

The professor was trying to do everything in his power against the clock.

Someone else rushed into the room. A bespectacled girl named Fey.

“P-professor! Have you seen Elen?”

“Not for a few days. What could she be doing at a time like this?!” he shouted, pounding the desk in frustration.

She hesitantly held out a thick file of papers.

“Th-this just came in the mail, addressed to me from Elen. It’s a design…”

“Of what?”

He imagined she was still trying to convince him to make a weapon to destroy the demons. As he flipped through the file, he realized it contained the exact opposite.

“An artificial hibernation chamber?!”

This was the thread of hope that would let them see the future. This would help them sleep through the long winter.

“Save memories into a specialized magic conductor. Freeze the body. Bring it back with *Resurrection*. Rewrite the information in their brains…”

It detailed a forbidden use of magicology.

It treated human personality like data. The average citizen would have a hard time with this.

However, it meant artificial hibernation was no longer a theoretical implausibility.

“I-it could go wrong in so many ways… There could be hiccups with reinstallation and sustainability of the devices…but…”

“But there’s no other way. It’s worth the risk.” The professor nodded. “We’ll only be able to prepare a few hundred units, since we need to finish constructing the shelter. But we have to do everything in our power to help humanity survive!”

“Y-yes sir!”

He had grabbed at the single thread of hope dangling in front of him.

The professor rushed to the research labs to make use of this gift from Elen and Fey.

It was the day before the calamity.

Humanity was killing their remaining time—from struggling to find a way to survive to giving into despair.

A certain genius magicologist was settling into a small underground shelter for herself.

“This won’t be enough to eliminate them.”

If a simple asteroid was enough to kill the dragons and demons, Elen would have been able to do it by herself.

“I will survive and eradicate them.”

Because they were repulsive.

There was no one left to check her simple obsession.

Elen climbed into her one-person chamber to ride out the long winter. She’d added a device onto her chamber—which wasn’t included in the design she’d given Fey—that ensured her mind would make it to the future even if the hibernation failed and her body rotted away.

That was why she faced no uncertainty. She fell into a long slumber with the earthquakes from the collision as her lullaby.

It felt only like a moment, but thousands of years had passed.

“Gah…! *Koff-koff*!”

Elen woke up violently, choking from the intense pain coming from her internal organs. Her frozen body had thawed, bringing her back to life. Her mind had been installed in one fluid process. She was satisfied by the success of her invention.

She climbed out of the chamber, exiting the underground shelter using *Tunnel*.

“It’s blinding…”

The sky was as blue and the sun was as bright as they were in her memories.

However, a bird’s eye view of the scene revealed nothing else was the same.

The tall concrete buildings with steel frames were gone, replaced by unspoiled forests stretching to the horizon.

“Did humanity not survive?”

Her fear proved unfounded. She located some human settlements, though they’d regressed from the technology that she’d known in her lifetime.

The houses were simple and wooden. The roads remained bare and unpaved. Farmers toiled the fields in place of machines. Children ran around in simple hemp clothing and kicked stones for fun.

“I can’t believe we’ve gone back to our old ways…”

She observed with *Telescope*, keeping her distance to prevent them from noticing her. She was struck by grief that she couldn’t put into words. Nothing from their studies in magicology had been passed down to the future.

“As long as humanity wasn’t destroyed…”

Only 1 percent of the world population had taken refuge in the underground shelter. A smaller percentage must have survived the impact. It was a miracle that a few hundred thousand people had been able to live through the long winter.

Elen started to get emotional, but she stopped herself, turning away from civilization and returning to her underground shelter.

It wasn’t because she was too shy to say hi. Something far darker reared its ugly head.

“This is my chance.”

Elen was the only one who possessed knowledge of advanced technology in a world that had returned to the Middle Ages. It would be simple to manipulate that into making the people worship her as their savior…or their god.

“This is my chance to be God.”

Cracking open the inspection port on the artificial hibernation chamber, Elen checked the equipment prepared as her backup plan.

She stood at the summit of magical potential in humans, which meant she marked their limits.

After all, there was a physical maximum of magic storage in flesh. Push past the limit, and anyone would be ripped apart from the inside out. If she wanted more power, she'd need to change her body into a more compatible form.

However, this alteration would necessitate abandoning her human appearance, growing into a giant, and sprouting scales or fur. In other words, she had to become a complete demon.

"I will not become one of them."

She picked at the blue scales on her chest, scratching the source of her disgust, which had stayed with her for thousands of years.

With her natural gifts, she had the potential to become a full-fledged dragon, and bare her teeth at the five Proxies, but she knew she would rather die than look one in its eyes. After all, they were at the core of her lifelong torment.

That was why she chose another path, one where she would die and become a "god."

"A little maintenance, and this should be good as new."

Elen smiled in delight when she discovered the device was only slightly damaged. It was a tool she developed as a byproduct of her experiments on saving memories to magic conductors.

It would let her die and exist forever. She called it a spirit converter, a machine to create an artificial ghost.

It was known that residual magic from the mages who had lost their lives to an untimely death turned into ghosts.

Elen had made an important discovery when she had looked into this transformation: Ghosts had no limit to their magic stores.

Humans were trapped in flesh prisons that had a cap. Anything above it was released from the body. However, ghosts were just lumps of magic, meaning they could store an infinite amount. In other words, if she couldn't touch the five dragons with her human hand, she'd surpass their power as a ghost.

"If I become a god, I can destroy the demons and the dragons."

A dark smile stretched across her face as she began to repair the spirit converter.

There was one reason she'd held off using this method to achieve her dreams: Ghosts couldn't generate their own magic. No body meant no production systems. That meant they were weak forms with finite life spans.

They were nothing compared with the mages of her time.

But Elen was a genius. That meant she was one step ahead.

She just needed someone to provide magic to her. Then her ghost self would grow strong forever, reaching the heights of a god.

“It’s done…”

The spirit converter started up, and Elen stroked it like it were her hideous progeny.

In the pre-asteroid world, no one would have been weird enough to worship her in ghost form.

But things were different now. They didn’t have newspapers, radio, or TV. The ignorant masses were in constant danger of disease, injury, and famine. They were *looking* for a savior.

Elen had just the magic and knowledge to save these little lambs.

They would start to worship her and devote their lives to spreading her word. Her followers would pray to her, forming the image of a Goddess in their mind, which would cause them to emit magic waves toward their object of worship. In other words, she would use the magic from her followers to grow infinitely to become God.

“Good-bye, pitiful Elen.”

She picked at the scales on her chest one last time, bidding her flesh farewell. The idea of parting from her body and becoming a ghost gave her no fear. Instead, she trembled from joy. Good riddance to her parents’ black hair, to her unloved face and body, to the stupid dragon scales that wouldn’t come off. She was going to reinvent herself—into a beautiful form that everyone would love and worship.

“Let’s go with golden hair… We’ll say I’m the Goddess of Light.”

With the ideal image of herself in her mind, she lay in the artificial hibernation chamber and turned on the spirit converter. Pain jolted through her as her magic and memories were stripped from her body, but she was high from adrenaline. She was no longer Elen, the ugly loner.

Her consciousness and magic slipped out of her body, floating into the night sky. It landed at a small village, descending on a young man sleeping in one of the crude wooden houses. When he woke in surprise, the ghost offered a smile and her name.

“I am Elazonia, the Goddess of Light. I have awakened and descended to save my lost children.”

This was the moment Elen had died, giving birth to a ghost made of her resentment for demons.

This was the moment that Goddess Elazonia was born.

Over three hundred years, her teachings spread through the continent. Shinichi let out a big sigh after watching it sped up.

Their trip down memory lane came to an end.

“She was killed. By herself.”

“I can understand why she wants to get rid of her body…” Arian sympathized, casting her eyes down as she touched the red scales on her neck.

If she had been born without them, she wouldn’t have been mistreated as a half dragon and would have lived happily with other people. She’d dreamed of it often. Her heart could have changed for better or for worse if she abandoned her body now.

“Maybe I would have become like her…tormenting demons and killing with no mercy…”

“Maybe.” Shinichi gave her shoulder a gentle pat as she shivered imagining it.

Weaknesses and strengths were two sides of the same coin. Too much confidence spelled arrogance. Just enough cowardice afforded caution.

Arian had suffered from an inferiority complex, which had kept her powers in check.

To Elen, her blue scales were the source of all resentment…and her last ties to her humanity.

“I feel better now.” Shinichi stretched his limbs, smirking. “Pitiful Elen is dead, leaving us with Elazonia, an uncooperative ghost. Now I don’t have to feel bad about sending her to the afterlife.”

“But…” Rino looked like she wasn’t convinced.

Elazonia was different from the legion in the Elven Tomb. She still possessed the mind and memories of Elen. Wasn’t it too early to give up on talking this out?

Rino must have known her wishes weren’t realistic, because she was silent.

Shinichi placed his hand on her shoulder. “Like I said, I don’t think we can reason with Elazonia. Do you still want to try making up with her?”

“…Yes.”

“All right. We can try.”

“Okay!”

Her face split into a huge grin. She’d believed he was completely opposed to the idea.

Regina watched, sending Shinichi a telepathic message in confidence.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually considering being amicable with that woman.”

She couldn’t save her rage for a later time, even if this was the request of her beloved daughter. That was the woman who’d captured her husband!

Shinichi returned her stern glare with feigned ignorance.

“Who knows? Let’s just say I found what I was looking for.”

“…I see.”

She knew what he was implying. Her eyes crinkled in a smile.

He flashed a grin in return. He felt no fear toward Elazonia anymore.

They say a monster keeps its true nature hidden. Seems the same could be said for gods.

Humans feared the unknown.

That was because they couldn’t guess what their opponent was thinking and what they were capable of doing. In other words, they didn’t know if they could be killed.

Without a way to resist, their only option was to tremble in fear. Hence why unknown monsters were a particularly frightening breed.

But now…they could understand Elazonia in digestible terms: a ghost, a mass of magic, a former human who had given up her corporeal body.

“First, we need to talk to the captain. We need to cut off any chance of her retreat. Then, we need to fill in Vermeita. And then Clarissa and her friends…”

“I see he’s afflicted with his usual malady.” Celes sighed with a smile as she watched Shinichi mutter to himself.

His expression meant he’d already seen their path to victory.

He was practically radiating joy when he realized he could accomplish his goal.

Meanwhile, Arian stepped close to the Red Dragon, looking nervous.

“Dad. I wanted to thank you. And—”

She wanted to ask about her mother, but right as she tried to broach the topic, the Red Dragon lifted one of his gigantic fingers.

“Dad?”

A warm glow started to spread from his fingertip.

The light engulfed her right hand, lifting off the symbol of the Goddess and leaving no trace.

“What…?” Arian looked up at him in awe that the Goddess’s curse had been lifted.

The Red Dragon cast another spell.

“Dimension Sword.”

A blade sharp enough to cut through space sliced off his talon. It morphed in midair, transforming into a sword with a single red line, resembling a blood vessel, running down the middle. The sword fit in Arian’s hand like it belonged there.

“Dad…”

She’d wanted to fight Goddess Elazonia for Shinichi’s sake, and he had given her the greatest gift in the world. Tears of gratitude welled up in her eyes.

She still wanted to talk with her father—to get to know where he’d met her mother and how he’d grown to love her.

As she opened her mouth, light enveloped her body. Her vision distorted, making her dizzy. It was a familiar sensation, the feeling of a *Teleport* spell. The Red Dragon was sending them off somewhere, signaling that he was done talking with them.

“Dad!” Arian screamed, not wanting to leave just yet, but he closed his heavy eyelids.

As her consciousness started to fade, she heard her father’s clumsy words in her mind—and hers alone.

“Request. Joy.”

Be happy. Those were his last words.

She realized they were standing in front of the Demon King’s castle.

“Dad…” She hugged her sword, sobbing.

Shinichi pulled her into a gentle hug. “I imagine it’s embarrassing for a father to recount memories of his wife with his daughter. Don’t blame him.”

As a fellow man, he tried to give her some context.

Arian nodded. “It’s okay. I understand.”

Though they didn’t talk much, she got the gist of his feelings.

He’d told her about Elazonia’s true nature, removed her symbol as a hero, and given her a weapon from his own body. He was supporting his beloved daughter down her own path.

“Let’s do this, Shinichi.” She wiped the tears from her eyes and gripped the dragon sword. “Let’s destroy the Goddess Elazonia and save the world!”

The look in her eyes made her seem like a real hero.

He chuckled. “Not quite.”

“Hmm?”

“Let’s save the Demon King and destroy the Goddess’s world.”

“Yeah!”

So what if there was no justice? They were going to do it to create their new domain.

Arian nodded eagerly and squeezed Shinichi’s hand.

Chapter 3
The Day to End the Myths

Ten miles from the Holy City, the foundation of the Goddess's church…

Elen's underground shelter was deep in the mountains. It was originally small, meant for only one person, but several extensions had turned it into an expansive facility that could easily fit an entire castle.

Inside were perfect rows of magic conductors. None were smaller than the national treasure of Tigris Kingdom, the Tears of Matteral. Attached to the conductors, the electrical circuit flickered on in an infinite loop.

One of them flashed with blinding light. A man appeared out of warped space.

He had no head. The symbol of the Goddess was carved into his right hand.

A hero blessed with the Goddess's protection. He'd been killed in a surprise attack by a monster, triggering the curse to bring him to the underground facility using *Apport*.

"Initiate recovery."

A wooden golem started moving, lifting his body and placing it on a conveyor belt. At the end was a large vat with crushed bones, blood, and the meat of animals captured in the area. The hero was flung into the blood and sinew. Another golem switched on a magic conductor connected to the vat.

"Initiate resurrection."

That acted as a tank, supplying magic to another conductor imprinted with the spell, activating *Resurrection*. The missing head was immediately replaced, formed from the contents of the vat.

The process, which used his genetic information, recovered only the body. There wasn't anything left inside his mind.

That was why the golem lifted the man out of the blood to place him on another conveyor belt. At the end was a crude bed, where he was laid to rest by another anthropomorphic being that strapped him into a contraption shaped like a helmet connected to conductors via cables.

"Initiate install."

The golem pressed a button, activating the spell. That pumped a flow of information into the hero's new brain, returning his memories until death, which had been stored in the conductor via the hero's symbol on his palm.

His body jerked, convulsing, but the install process completed without any issue.

Before he awoke, the anthropomorphic puppet pressed another button.

"Initiate delivery."

The button activated *Asport*, sending the hero to the church closest to where he died.

That was the system that created the immortal heroes given the Goddess's protection.

“Faster than reinstalling the OS on your computer,” the Demon King’s advisor would comment if he ever saw the place.

But a normal person with normal emotional faculties would vomit in disgust.

If they were a hero who had died at least once, it would destroy their sense of self.

Its inventor was a floor above this facility. The genius magicologist who treated humans like objects. Elazonia was in the research lab, casting spells on lumps of ore.

“Element Conversion…Shape Change…”

It transformed to copper, gold, or silicon. Pieces as small as one micron were worked together to make the electrical circuits that attached to magic conductors.

“Would it be faster to build a manufacturing plant?” Elazonia spoke to herself as she pinched the finished circuit between her fingers.

One look at any design, and she could pull it from memory with *Search*. That gave her everything to know about circuits.

However, she had no knowledge of making a manufacturing line for mass production, which meant she’d have to design a factory from the ground up. It would technically be more efficient if she intended to mass-produce them.

She picked up the circuit and walked to a large metal casket that could fit ten grown adults. As with the hero resurrection device, it had a number of cables connecting to magic conductors. Elazonia attached the finished circuit and glanced at a huge pillar of ice placed beside it.

In her eyes were disgust for demons and unconcealed joy.

“I can’t believe something of utility would come from the demons. I suppose it can be attributed to his species.”

The Blue Demon King was a cut above the rest, even though his kin were constantly exposed to the Blue Dragon. Even compared with the abnormal capacities of cardinals, he still regenerated magic magnitudes faster.

“You’re the best magic generator.” Elazonia laughed, stroking the pillar of ice that encased him.

Her complicated plan to take a hostage and capture the king of the demons was all to use him as a magic generator.

Elazonia’s power was crowdfunded from her millions of followers, but that wasn’t enough. The majority had none to offer, and the waves became weaker over distance, since she wasn’t using direct contact to absorb their magic.

Only the heroes were the exception. Her curse strengthened their connection, giving her a large boost. However, it was far from efficient, since she had to resurrect them, wasting her previous stores.

“Those little shits are dragging me down!”

Her face clamped down in anger when she remembered their stupid faces.

The perverts who enjoyed getting off by the elves were bad enough. In fact, she'd regretted ordering the destruction of the Elven Tomb, which she feared contained records of Elen.

That said, they had a decent arrangement in place. The heroes fought the elves every ten days and contributed magic to her, leveling out at net zero. She could handle that. Fine.

However, she would never forgive former bishop Hube for leading an army of ten thousand heroes against the Demon King. That had resulted in the deaths of more than seven thousand men—all without contributing a single ounce of magic.

She blew through years of magic stores on their resurrections. And because his new heroes had no skills, dying often wasted more of her powers!

"Maybe I should kill them like Hube."

It had crossed her mind before, but it would only result in the ignorant masses believing in the existence of Elazok the Evil God, which was all from the imagination of the advisor of demons. Its name was obviously a play on hers.

It would really suck to lose followers because she didn't save them from his clutches.

But these days of irritation would soon come to an end.

"From now on, I'll have more magic than I can use."

The metal casket was a magic collection device. It would encase the Demon King, where he would be intravenously administered water and nutrients. She would reap his magic for years to come as he remained neither living nor dead.

With all the costs involved, the net amount of magic from a normal mage was in the red, which was why she hadn't implemented this before. But in the Blue Demon King's case, the total balance swung in positives.

"Next is mass production."

As Elazonia looked up his huge body, her lips curled into a happy smile.

Why have only him…when she could make clones? With tens of thousands of Demon Kings, she could have a magical power plant. That way, she wouldn't need her stupid followers. She could convert all the mana in the world to magic, pumping her with enough power to defeat the demons, the dragons, and everything else.

"The problem is safety." She sat on the magic collection device, furrowing her brows.

She had the knowledge and power to re-create a hero from thin air using their genetic information. Cloning was simple. But if she made tens of thousands of Demon Kings, one might escape its confines and revolt against her.

"Should I break their spirits?"

Not like torture. That was how the church punished heroes for their crimes.

She *could* surgically remove a sliver of their brains, keeping them alive but rendering them harmless. There was one major problem.

"Their rate of production would drop…"

The biological system to produce magic didn't have a material form, like the heart and lungs. It was technically the entire body, though even Elazonia didn't understand the specifics.

If she did, she wouldn't have bothered capturing the Demon King, instead weaponizing *Creating Life* to make a living magical power plant. But based on data available from various studies, deficient body parts weren't the only things that decreased magic production. Even psychological changes, like a shift in personality, could make it worse.

"The mind is just a collection of electrical impulses fired between neurons, but it can impact a physical particle like mana."

Elazonia decided that once things calmed down, she might try to clone the Demon King and conduct experiments to unravel the mystery behind magic production systems. But first, she needed to deal with a more immediate problem.

"Does the device need any fundamental improvements? I could improve the durability of the materials. Or secure him in a large cross to render his limbs immobile. Or bleed him of magic to the point of death, which would prevent him from casting any spells…"

She wandered around the large research lab, muttering to herself just like a certain advisor. Her eyes focused on something.

"What is that?"

It was a small casket embedded in machinery. It looked like one of her magic collection devices, but she didn't recognize this thing. She suspiciously opened the lid of the casket, remembering when she saw what was inside.

"Oh, it's Elen."

It was the dried body of the girl with scales on her chest. Skin and bones now.

It was her former self.

About three hundred years ago, she had sucked magic from her own body. Her religion was still new. It was right around the time when she chose Eument to become the first pope. She barely had followers.

The shell of a body had excelled at producing magic, enough to maintain her ghost form.

Just the thought of it made her want to hurl. She must have erased her memory of it, and it must have reached the end of its life, forgotten in this casket.

"…Filthy." Elazonia looked at her own corpse with contempt. "Return to atomic dust, *Disintegrate*."

The body of Elen burst into particles of light, transforming into a white dust. Elazonia used *Asport* to remove it outside the shelter before placing a hand to her own head.

“Uninstall.”

As a ghost, Elazonia’s memory wasn’t fuzzy like memory in a human brain. It was precise and clear like a computer. She had already wiped out any events related to her human form.

She was the Goddess of Light now, worshipped by millions of followers. It no longer served her to have memories of Elen—pitiful, unloved, and alone.

“…Oh. What was I doing?”

She couldn’t remember why she was standing in front of this small casket. There were other things that needed her attention. She turned away from the empty container to carry them out.

“I must pick up speed to get those beasts by making more Demon Kings and magic collection devices.”

She couldn’t even remember why she’d originally wanted to destroy them in the first place…which was why she couldn’t reflect on the past or her shortcomings. All she could do was press forward to achieve her goal.

Just as she was about to begin experimentation on her magic collection devices, she could feel a few different magic sources.

“How annoying.”

Someone was interrupting her fun. She clicked her tongue.

The door to the confidential facility was blown off its frame by the maggots she’d forgotten about. She’d been too focused on dealing with the Demon King.

“Like moths to the flame.”

“What a coincidence. We have a similar saying where I’m from.”

She’d always gotten a bad feeling from this boy with black hair, Shinichi Sotoyama.

The corners of his mouth curled up, returning her sneer with a fearless smile.

Elazonia didn’t seem fazed when Shinichi, Arian, Rino, Celes, and Regina burst into the facility. In fact, she smiled when she noticed the Blue Princess of War—and her potent magic waves.

“Oh! Another potential generator. A good match for the Demon King. I love when I have more samples to dissect.”

“What was that?” Regina glared at the egotistical Goddess, her frozen husband in the background.

If looks could kill, Elazonia would be dead.

Shinichi raised his hand to stop Regina from pouncing on her before nudging Rino forward. The daughter of the Demon King was nervous as she took a step toward Elazonia.

“Elen, stop all of this!” she said.

“……”

Elazonia's silent stare bore into her, but that didn't keep Rino from speaking up.

"I understand you hate us because of your horrible experiences as a human. But not all of us are bad."

"……"

"My mommy and daddy are demons, but they're very powerful and cool and have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying weaklings. Sirloin and Kalbi are strong and kind and love to work in the fields and gather vegetables from the forests."

"……"

Rino was desperately rattling off the good qualities of her kin, but nothing changed in the Goddess's expression.

"My friend Marine, who's a mermaid, always sings—"

"*Force*," she suddenly interrupted, launching an invisible force.

"Aaah!" Rino reflexively put up a magical barrier, but it didn't block the spell completely. She skidded backward across the floor.

"Are you all right?!"

"I–I'm okay."

Shinichi rushed over. She tried to smile at him, lifting up her scraped cheek.

Elazonia looked down at them. "I was generous enough to lend you an ear. But blabbering forever about demons? And some unknown woman named Elen? If this is a joke, I'm not laughing."

"What…?"

Rino almost started to wonder if she had the wrong person.

However, Shinichi figured it out. Sweat beaded on his brow. "Did you erase your memories as her?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you forgotten about Fey? The professor? Your parents? Your boyfriends? Have you forgotten about your life as a human?"

"Absurd." Elazonia snorted at his grave look. "I am Elazonia, Goddess of Light. I don't have parents or friends—not like feeble little humans."

"No way…"

She wasn't lying or bluffing. Rino fell to her knees, understanding the gravity of things.

She had even managed to wipe away the last thing connecting her ghost form to her corporeal body—her memories as Elen.

How could you try to get rid of your roots?

Seething internally, Shinichi pitied her. He could never bring himself to forget the pain of Nozomi's death, which had hardened him and became emotional scar tissue. It was integral to his current identity.

However, Elazonia had no reservations about deleting everything about her past. Every moment from elation to sorrow—it was all gone.

When we met last time, there was still something human about her…

After all, she'd ordered the destruction of the Elven Tomb—which must have contained damning evidence—but not the elves who guarded it. She must have felt something about murdering her surviving coworkers and their descendants.

Who knew if one of the ten people who escaped the legion was Fey or the professor?

Even if the other staff of the Magicology Department couldn't scrub her of her lifelong resentment, she had hesitated to brutalize her acquaintances.

Her transformation into the Goddess Elazonia was complete when she threw away her last shred of humanity.

"Rino, she's already…"

Shinichi urged her to give up, but Rino stood again, face crumpling as she went against Elazonia. "Okay, Elazonia. I want to ask you again. Please return my daddy."

"……"

"And please make a grave for Fey. Then we can apologize and be friends. How does that sound?"

Setting aside her anger, she stretched out her hand as a symbol of their friendship.

Any normal person would regret their crimes and accept that hand. Even the most callous would waver. But inside the figure in front of her, there was nothing resembling a human heart.

"Force."

For a second time, an invisible shock wave collided with Rino, taking Shinichi along as he tried to cover her.

"Aaah!"

"What's a disgusting demon trying to do, ordering around a god? Die!"

What a waste of time. Furious, Elazonia began to cast a serious spell at her.

"Cremated by divine anger and turned to ash. *Lightning Vortex*."

It was the same lightning spell she'd used to kill her parents.

Powerless to get to his feet, Shinichi hugged Rino as they faced the white glare threatening to incinerate them into dust.

At that moment, Arian leaped in front of them, slicing the incoming ray with a horizontal strike. It was sucked into the blade of her sword, vanishing like it had never existed.

"You again."

Elazonia's face contorted in disgust, but there was a glimpse of surprise in her expression.

It wasn't normal for a sword to eliminate a bolt of lightning, since it lacked the fundamental capacity of *Fireball*. She recognized the energy emanating from the sword in Arian's hand.

Her surprise become hatred.

"You borrowed the dragon's power…!"

She may have erased her memories, but there was something about those magic waves that transformed her into a demon. It must have been etched into her soul.

Holding the sword aloft, Arian's right hand didn't have its hero symbol anymore.

Anyone who could remove her spell had to be significantly more powerful than her, which only left the five dragons.

"How insidious!"

In a rage, Elazonia began to cast another spell, but Arian interrupted her.

"Lady Elazonia. If I may, I would like to ask you one question."

"…What?" She stopped, palm out. Maybe because Arian had been so polite.

She lowered her dragon sword. "Did you really kill the bishop?"

"Which one?"

"Bishop Hube."

"Oh, that chump," she spat.

His name finally jogged her memories.

"I did. He failed to destroy the demons, even after I'd given him a portion of my power. I gained nothing by letting him live," she said without exhibiting an ounce of guilt.

"…I see."

Arian listlessly cast her eyes down. A small part of her heart had refused to believe he had died—but she had her answer now.

"Maybe the bishop did some horrific things. But they were all for you."

He'd threatened Boar Kingdom into mobilizing their military, starting the war with the demons. He'd led an army of ten thousand heroes in another attack.

The demons found him to be a pesky enemy. He must have fallen out of the favor of some people in Boar Kingdom, too.

Though his personal motivations played a part, he had attacked the demons to carry out her divine plan.

"After all he did for you! I can't believe you would kill him for trying!"

Hube had invited her to become a hero, helping her connect with other people. Maybe he had ulterior motives. That didn't change his impact. He was what started her on the path that led to Shinichi, and she owed him for that.

The Goddess snorted at Arian's criticism. "My followers choose to devote their magic and lives to me. What's wrong with doing what I want with them?"

"What…?" Arian was at a loss for words.

It was heartless.

She was starting to understand that Elazonia wasn't the Goddess of Light. She was a vengeful ghost born from animosity.

Arian wished she could believe Elazonia was their beacon of hope.

"But you've tried to save people…"

Even if her ulterior goal was to collect her followers' magic, it was undeniable that the church and its heroes had protected the masses from monsters and treated them for disease.

Even if 99 percent of her objective was motivated by selfish reasons, the remaining 1 percent must have stemmed from her desire to keep other people from experiencing the same kind of suffering she had. Arian wanted to believe that.

"If you've gotten rid of your humanity, you won't be able to save anyone!"

This was a desperate plea from someone who had once been proud of being a hero.

But Elazonia laughed. "Why must I save people as God?"

Who said God had an obligation to protect humanity?

"I guess you're right…" Arian looked down, grinding her teeth.

As long as she was an ally for humanity, one could argue there was some semblance of justice in her actions, even if she was the enemy of the demons.

But the monster in front of them had no sense of heroism. It was hatred incarnate. Its only goal was to destroy the beasts—without knowing the reason.

"Goddess Elazonia. I'm grateful that you selected me as one of your heroes."

Arian refused to believe Elazonia's only motivation was to tap into her magic as the daughter of the loathsome dragon. She must have sympathized with her position, as another victim cursed with dragon scales, unloved by others for her beastliness.

Arian wanted to believe in the humanity of past Elazonia, even if the current one refused to admit it.

"That's why I have to defeat you—now that you've changed!"

Arian thrust the tip of her father's dragon sword at the lost ghost.

Elazonia chuckled for a third time, laughing at her former pawn who tried to stand against her.

"Restrict, *Photon Bind*."

Chains of light whipped out of thin air, coiling tightly around Arian.

Hube had ordered the same spell from thirty priests, but it paled in comparison to Elazonia's bind. The links dug into Arian's skin, threatening to rip her into tiny pieces.

"All talk, huh? Look at you. You'll never amount to more than a disgraceful half dragon."

Elazonia bored down on the red scales on Arian's throat.

If this had been in the past, she would have averted eye contact.

But she was different now.

"Yeah, I'm a half dragon!"

Since her childhood, she had concealed her scales, afraid that others would find her disgusting. There was a piece of her that still rejected herself, even though Shinichi had accepted her and she'd befriended the demons.

However, she had developed an emotional connection with her father—even if they didn't have enough words or time together. She had accepted herself from the inside out.

"I'm Arian, daughter of the Red Dragon!"

Her irises flashed gold, and her pupils lengthened like lizard eyes.

Magic rays surged from her skin, tearing apart the chains of light.

"You little…!"

The repressed dragon inside Arian had awakened, shaking Elazonia for the first time since their confrontation started.

As the Proxies of the Planet, dragons had the power of the world, giving them access to inexhaustible mana in the atmosphere. Arian might only be half of one, but she absorbed enough magic to wither the area around and stir the air with her awakened powers.

"Goddess… No. *Elazonia.* I'll end your hatred today!"

Her declaration was tinged with kindness as she kicked off the ground. It sounded like concrete had exploded. Arian was suddenly in front of Elazonia, bringing her sword down in a diagonal slash.

"Multiple Shields." Elazonia cast a defensive spell.

Six heavy shields manifested before her, sturdy enough to deflect a cannonball.

If Arian had wielded a normal magic weapon, it wouldn't have pierced through one, let alone six. However, in her possession was a dragon blade, made from the Red Dragon's talon, a bane sword that consumed magic to add to its own power.

It severed and absorbed the six magic shields, ripping into Elazonia's left arm.

"Aaagh!"

It lopped off some of her magic, making her scream in pain that she had never experienced as a ghost.

"Ack… Photon Bind."

Elazonia knew she had no direct way of defending against the dragon sword and attempted to bind its wielder again.

“That won’t work!” Arian used brute force to smash the links to pieces.

That had been part of her plan. “Be released from the binds of the planet, *Zero Gravity*.”

The force pulling her body down was gone. Arian’s feet lifted from the floor. Even with her strength and weapon, a swordswoman without footing was like a bird without wings.

“Ah?!” Arian flapped her arms and legs around in the air.

Elazonia collected magic into another spell.

“White flames to set lava on fire, incinerate her to bone. *Plasma Blast.*”

Volcanic fire exploded, threatening to vaporize steel at almost twenty thousand degrees. Arian was suspended motionless in the air—

“Rooooaaar!” She spewed out magic.

Half Dragon’s Breath. The red light shot past the flames, swallowing Elazonia.

“Gaaaaah—!”

Elazonia desperately tried to resist the pain. It felt like her magic was unbinding her body.

Arian was launched backward from the force of her spell, falling to the ground at Shinichi’s feet.

“Are you okay— Yow! You’re hot!” he yelped.

“Y-yeah, I’m fine.”

“Fine?! You’re as hot as an electric burner!”

Shinichi tried to smile at her as he propped her back up, scorching his palms and worrying he might become dehydrated from sweating.

It was cool that she’d managed to trigger her latent powers, but her body couldn’t seem to keep up.

Arian managed to sit straight.

Elazonia escaped death, letting out another fit of laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh. Consider my last statement retracted. I knew you had it in you, disgraceful half dragon,” she congratulated sarcastically.

She’d already lost half her magic to *Half Dragon’s Breath*. They could see through her semitransparent ghost form. But the smile on her face stayed in place.

“Apport.”

A set of magic conductors appeared within arm’s reach, allowing her to absorb and restore her magic.

“How convenient.”

Shinichi clicked his tongue—though not in surprise or discouragement.

He had already learned from the Red Dragon she had mass stores of magic in her underground facility.

Elazonia looked down at them, seeming triumphant. “I am Elazonia, the Goddess of Light. You cannot destroy me as long as I have followers.”

She still had rows of reserves, which were continuing to be filled by her believers.

“Did you think you could win against my infinite power when you’ve got limited resources?!”

She laughed shrilly, like a god observing from the heavens.

“Huff-huff…”

“……”

Arian couldn’t reply between her ragged breaths. Celes and Regina fixed their steely glares at the Goddess, electing not to open their mouths since entering the research lab.

Shinichi spoke for all of them. “You’ve already lost.”

“…What?”

He finally let out his smile. Elazonia thought he’d lost his mind.

“Ha-ha-ha, it’s true that your magic is limitless when you have followers. Key phrase: ‘*when* you have followers.’”

“…What are you implying?”

She sounded like a cornered dog, all bark and no bite.

For some reason, dread sent shivers down her spine. This time, it rocked her entire body, unlike when Arian had triggered her transformation.

Shinichi smelled her fear, smiling wider and pointing to the heavens. “Look for yourself. God sees everything.”

“Do you intend to run away when I take my eyes off you?”

Elazonia put on a brave face as she allowed the vision in one of her eyes to reach the sky. It passed the ceiling of the research lab, leaving behind the sprawling land. When she saw the cloudless sky, her carefree expression furrowed in surprise.

“What is this?!”

It should have been around noon, but the world was dim, though not completely dark.

A sprawling curtain had blocked out the sun, letting multicolored lights play across its surface…which formed into her own gobsmacked image.

“What is this?!” parroted the screen via telepathic message.

It rang across the entire continent of Uropeh for all to hear.

“No… No way…!”

Blood drained from her face, making her complexion more ghastly.

Shinichi watched her with the evilest smile in history on his face. “That’s right. Everything has been broadcast to the entire continent.”

Everything from her bullying a young girl with a peace offering…to her admitting humans were nothing but her source of magic.

“Like I said: You’ve already lost.”

Even if Shinichi had been defeated, the people of the world would never worship her now that they’d discovered her true nature.

This marked the moment that destroyed their faith—a following that took three hundred years for Elazonia to cultivate.

A short while before they broke into Elazonia's underground laboratory, Saint Sanctina paid a visit to the king's castle in the mining country of Tigris.

"Thank you for seeing me today."

"'Tis I who should thank thee," replied King Sieg of Tigris, known with love as the captain.

Behind Sanctina were demons, including Sirloin and Ribido, hauling magic conductors.

"Should we set them down here, *oink*?"

"Would you mind placing them on this cart? We're going to move them," instructed Dritem, the court mage.

"Sure thing, *oink*."

The demons piled the conductors on the designated spot. Each one was about the size of a small keg. As a set, they were larger than the Tears of Matteral, their lost national treasure. All the crystals glimmered with stored magic.

"Thou hast done well to gather so much in so short a time."

"It was an easy job—with the help of Rino's mother." Sanctina flashed him a triumphant smile as Sieg looked at her in admiration.

"Give your magic to save our lord."

Regina had sent out a call to the demon world, using her fists to silence any (who pretended to be) opposed (for the opportunity to fight her). They'd scraped together as much magic and conductors as they could.

As a species that possessed potent power, they collected more magic than even necessary to operate the dragon-type golem, the Black Boulder Dragon Hellsaur.

Even then, they lacked sufficient strength and came to Tigris to ask for assistance.

"'Tis a mysterious sight." Sieg watched the workers, overcome by emotions again.

"Is this everything? Wow."

"We brought all that the dvergr had on hand, *moo*."

"The skilled smiths, right? I'd like them to show me their skills some time."

"Hee-hee. And I want to learn more about Kalbi. ♥ "

"Don't touch my butt, *moo*!" Kalbi shrieked, reminded of the torture methods of the man-loving incubus that the holy warriors underwent.

Demons and humans—followers of the church, at that.

Before, they would have stood against each other as natural enemies. No one could have imagined them opening up like this.

"I imagine the world will continue to change," said Sieg.

It was still ingrained in humans to be afraid of these so-called beasts. As hard as it was to unlearn this emotional response, they were furious at the church.

However, the world would end if they continued Elazonia's values, which had come from resentment.

Sanctina slowly shook her head. "It won't change on its own. We'll be the ones driving its transformation."

"'Tis Rino's wish."

The two nodded to each other, remembering the smile of their beloved angel before looking up to the castle's gate. Once preparations were complete, the bell started to clang.

"What's going on?"

Living without electricity, it was standard for people to sleep and wake early. The populace was already up, sticking their heads out their windows to scope out the situation.

Sanctina used her magic to amplify the king's voice.

"My beloved people of Tigris, this is Sieg Fatts. I am in urgent need of your assistance."

He delivered his speech as a king—without his old-timey flair as the captain of the boys' club. He wasn't making an order but a request with a careful explanation of the situation at hand.

"In a little bit, Rino the Diva, Arian the Red Hero, and my good friend Shinichi will be heading toward a final battle against the Goddess Elazonia."

"What?"

"To reveal her true nature—to every person on the continent of Uropeh. I ask you to lend your magic one more time."

"What does that mean? Are you asking us to do what we used to do?"

"I will compensate you for your assistance, even if it means emptying the kingdom's coffers. If you wish to assist, please gather in front of the castle gates."

"……" The people seemed bewildered.

Sanctina called out in a loud voice.

"This is Sanctina. Until a short while ago, I worked for the Goddess's church. I understand if it's difficult for you to listen to me, since I let my ego get in the way last time."

"……"

"I'm begging you for your help. If we all work together, we can show the Goddess's true identity to the world. Without it, I will be unable to save Rino."

"Rino…"

"I implore you! I beg you! Please!"

Tears started to stream down her face. It wasn't to fake her saintliness. They came from her heart—from her dedication to saving the love of her life—but she was also crying out regret for her past actions, shame for being weak, because she could do nothing but ask for their help.

Her sincere request must have touched their hearts, because one person, then two, then hordes of people gathered in front of the castle, forming a massive line that swallowed the entire road.

“You guys…!” Sanctina sprinted out the castle gates, an emotional smile on her face, as the crowd told her how they felt.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not doing this for you. I want to help Rino because she resurrected me.”

“I’m just really interested in this final battle with the Goddess and her true nature.”

“I’ll give you as much magic as I can as long as you pay me.”

They each had their own list of reasons: their debt to Rino, simple curiosity, hope to earn some money. Everyone was happy to lend a hand. Out of the mass of people came one little girl squeezing her mother’s hand.

“Miss!”

“You’re the one who came in to have your leg healed…”

“I’m Elma!”

Sanctina had only remembered her face, because she was a cute little girl.

“Elma. Right. I’m sorry, Rino would never forget one of her patients’ names…”

“It’s all right.” She shook her head like it didn’t bother her. In fact, she broke into a huge grin, happy that Sanctina had recognized her. “Your smile used to scare me, but you’re not frightening anymore.”

“Thanks to Rino.”

“I loved seeing you work with her! You were so nice around Rino!”

To Sanctina, she was nothing more than one of the thousands of people that she’d healed. But to the girl, Sanctina was a savior who’d treated a major injury.

“That’s why I want to help you!” said the girl with a big smile as she squeezed Sanctina’s hand.

Not to the fake Saint. To the real Sanctina.

There were a number of her former patients in the crowd, all of whom looked at her as if to express their gratitude.

“…Thank you.” Warm tears welled up in Sanctina’s eyes as she squeezed her hand back.

That’s when Ribido came over, dragging the cart with magic conductors, under a spell to look like a human.

“Hmm? Are you cheating on Rino, Sanctie? I’m going to snitch on you!”

“Ribido, which would you prefer: being burnt to ash or cut up into fish food?”

“Oh, so scary. ♥ ” Ribido wasn’t fazed by death threats, taking Sanctina’s free hand. “I got a message from Celes that they’ve arrived at her hideout.”

“Then we need to begin.” Sanctina nodded, gesturing to the crowd. “Please join hands.”

“All right.”

“Don’t tense up. Just relax and take deep breaths.”

“In… Out…”

“Imagine your warmth passing through your hands, flowing into me. That will let me gather your magic.”

“Um… Like this?”

They weren’t used to lending magic like the priests. Though they were confused by the process, they managed to do as instructed. Their power started to flow into her.

“I shall assist as well,” said Sieg, joining hands with a nearby citizen who held hands with the court mage, who then joined the soldiers and the holy warriors and all the way to the orc and minotaur and other demons who watched from the shadows of the castle gate.

Light flowed from the conductors on the cart, making Sanctina feel like she was burning up from magic.

“Agh! Ah!”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m all right.”

The little girl looked up at her in concern, but Sanctina offered a smile, even as sweat trickled down her face.

Inside Sanctina’s mind was Celes’s voice. *“We’re ready. How are things over there?”*

“Everything is ready.”

The two nodded at the same time, casting the same spell together.

“Link.”

Celes’s thoughts pumped into Sanctina’s mind. Though it took a significant amount of magic to share their senses, they had more than enough to burn through—for what was to come next.

“Far beyond clouds, draw a curtain across the heavens, placing the sun’s great rays in my hands…”

A spell of massive proportions. Similar to yet distinctly different from the images of *Solar Ruin* drilled into her mind as a member of the church.

She formed a billowing magical screen in the sky, stretching from horizon to horizon.

Unlike *Solar Ruin*, which concentrated the sun’s light into a single point like a magnifying glass burning ants, this spell had no destructive power. It simply altered the gathered rays and cast them to the world.

“Show my sight to the people below this sky. *Magnified Projection*!”

The magic in her body blasted up into a pillar of light, rising toward the sky. It crept to the edge of the atmosphere, turning into a gigantic curtain to block out the sky. It absorbed the rays to generate more power before projecting Celes’s vision: images of Shinichi and the others heading toward Elazonia’s underground laboratory.

“A video captured by a camera can be sent via electromagnetic wave. The waves received are output again as a video. It was basically the same as a television.”

Unfortunately, Sanctina hadn’t understood a word of Shinichi’s explanation. But his desire to broadcast Rino was eventually realized when they bent the annoying laws of physics and changed the plan to a huge curtain in the sky.

“All right! It’s showtime—featuring Rino! *Omnidirectional Telepathy*!”

A telepathic message shot off in every direction, with no specific target, sending the audio from Celes to the people. With that, much of the people on the continent of Uropeh would see and hear the entirety of the final battle with the Goddess.

“Oh, to show Rino’s work to the entire continent! I can die a happy woman!”

“I agree, but thou must stave off your death till this is complete!” warned Sieg.

She was about to collapse. Maintaining the spell drained her magical and physical energy, though she was still smiling.

They all looked up at the screen to see a nervous Rino as they paused before the door to the underground laboratory.

“Can you guys hear me? I know some of you already know me, but my name is Rino. And…I’m…I’m the daughter of the Blue Demon King Ludabite.”

“““Wh-whaaaaaaat—?!”””

The masses of people were floored.

Rino continued her painful confession. “I’m sorry I lied. I was afraid everyone would hate me because I was a demon, so I didn’t have the chance to tell you.”

“……”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. I just want you to watch Elen’s story… the tale of Goddess Elazonia until the very end.”

Rino bowed her head.

The group used *Tunnel* to open a hole in the ground reaching the underground facility. It wasn’t just Tigris that stood watching with bated breath. Millions of people on the continent of Uropeh had their eyes locked on the screen.

Rino, known to some as the Diva or the Superstar Goddess.

All this time, she had been the daughter of the Demon King.

The revelation shocked the people in Uverse, the capital of grapes and wine. But then they saw a brave little girl, who didn't hold a grudge against her father's captor, who tried to convince the other side to stop the fighting and become friends.

That was enough to make them forget their animosity toward demons. It ignited anger toward Elazonia—for not only rejecting her peace offering, but attempting to murder her.

"A goddess would never try to kill a little child!"

"You call them filthy demons? You're the one who has a filthy heart!"

Rino had healed their wounds for free and even entertained them with concerts.

Even if they'd had no fond memories of Rino, Elazonia's words and actions were just so egregious.

"You got this, Rino!"

"Don't lose to the wicked wretch!"

The people of Uverse stood united, shouting words of encouragement into the sky.

A minstrel visiting a city on the southern coast of the continent watched Rino's projected image in the sky, a huge grin on his face.

"Would you look at that! That's got to be the greatest stage in the world!"

Once the singer to his musical accompaniment, the little Diva was now facing off with the Goddess, broadcast to the millions of people on the continent. He had spent his every day spreading her songs to the people. There was nothing in the world that could make his heart leap for joy more than seeing her on that stage.

"Dammit! I wish they'd invited me."

He clenched his teeth, wanting to see the whole performance in person. Then, he pulled out his lute, strumming a dramatic tune to the people of the city staring up at the sky in confusion, heightening the tension and excitement of the encounter.

"Show us a new legend that can stand the test of time!"

The lute provided the background music to the climatic end: a united front between humans and demons standing against the Goddess.

The middle-aged owner of a tavern in Boar Kingdom dropped his fresh batch of french fries, rushing out to the sidewalk and looking up to see the images in the sky.

"Little Miss Arian is a half dragon, huh…?"

The sight of her with shining gold eyes and waves of red magic could only be explained by the fact that she was the daughter of a dragon. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't afraid of her incredible power, which went beyond human capabilities. Filling the tavern owner's heart were understanding and happiness.

"Ha-ha. She looks better now. Not as nervous anymore."

He had seen thousands of people in the years running his tavern—from babies to criminals. Arian always had a cheerful front, but he'd seen something beneath that, something that smelled like fear.

She stood against Elazonia, but there wasn't a single ounce of fear on her face anymore. All he could see was acceptance of who she was and determination to protect the people important to her.

"Go get her, Miss Arian!"

It wasn't just the tavern owner. Residents of the city had come out, crying out in support of her.

At the northernmost part of the continent where monsters swarmed in the restricted zone, the people of Mouse Village cheered at the courageous sight of Arian.

"Go! Over there!"

"Make her pay for what she did to our ancestors!" cried the village chief, now understanding what Shinichi had meant when he was there.

A short way off from the excitement in Mouse Village, the Red Dragon went to the summit. It was his first time aboveground in hundreds of years. He looked up at the images of his daughter.

"……"

He didn't have enough words to express his support. But he could feel the magic necessary for the broadcast wasn't strong enough.

He could feel it wasn't reaching the entire continent, so he added just a little boost of his own.

"Channel, *Link.*"

He sent it along channels in the ground toward the spell caster, Sanctina in Tigris, bolstering her power and casting *Physical Enchantment* to help her body. Then, he manipulated air flows throughout the continent to remove clouds above any human settlements.

That should be enough to get the broadcast of the final battle with the Goddess to the entire continent of Uropeh.

"……"

He questioned whether or not it was all right as a Proxy of the Planet to support human activity, seeing they were as worthless to the planet as moss. But he quickly found the answer.

"Necessary."

The ghost called the Goddess Elazonia hated the dragons for nothing. She wanted to destroy these so-called beasts so much that she'd even considered destroying the entire planet. She had to be an enemy of the planet, and a Proxy needed to eliminate her. If that was the case, then it was his duty as a Proxy to support any humans who would try to destroy Elazonia.

The Red Dragon finally came to his conclusion. It felt like an excuse. He sat silently, staring at the sky, watching the images of his daughter who he'd done nothing for until now.

The entire continent learned of Elazonia's true nature. While the majority supported Arian, the Holy City was thrown into chaos.

"Isn't Lady Elazonia a good god trying to save humanity?!"

"We've given her everything, and she saw us as nothing more than tools…"

"It's a lie! It's a plot by the demons!"

"But Hube really did disappear. It only makes sense if Elazonia killed him…"

Some people fell into despair, betrayed by the person they'd believed in. Others screamed in denial. The confusion wasn't just in the streets. It was also in the Archbasilica. The three former cardinals—now archbishops—sat transfixed after hearing the truth about the Goddess.

"……"

Effectus couldn't even bring himself to say his famous line, "Indeed." He simply sat on the floor, a shell of his former self.

"…This may be my only chance." Snobe, deciding that the Goddess's church had run its course, started to run detailed calculations.

Out of the three of them, only the Holy Mother Cardinal Vermeita looked determined. She showed herself on the Archbasilica's balcony and called out to the crowd of followers that seethed like a chaotic cauldron.

"Please calm down. That is not the Goddess Elazonia… That is the Evil God Elazok who has recently been creating strife in our world!"

"""Wh-what?!"""

The people were shocked to learn they had confused the gods. The light of hope returned to their eyes.

"That's right. Our Lady Elazonia would never say that!"

"That's the person pulling Cardinal Hube's strings—I meant Evil Priest Hube!"

"But they called her Elazonia, and she called herself that, too!"

The people were relieved for a brief moment, but some of them started pointing out discrepancies, throwing the followers into chaos again.

Vermeita drew a line.

"I understand your confusion. That's both the Evil God Elazok and the Goddess Elazonia."

"What does that mean?!"

Vermeita waited for the people's attention to gather on her.

"I shall now reveal the truth to you. Our Lady Elazonia extracted the evil from inside herself, allowing her to become the Goddess of Light. However, that evil gathered its own power, beginning to act on its own."

"Which means… It can't be…"

"Yes, that is the lost half of the Goddess Elazonia—the Evil God Elazok!"

"""Wh-what?!"""

The followers were floored, but immediately believed her words at face value. As people who had decided to just accept the Goddess's teachings,

they had become lazy, abandoning their ability to reason for themselves because it was too much effort.

“Yeah, that’s the evil side of Lady Elazonia. It’s not the Goddess of Light.”

“And that’s why they just called her Elazonia and are trying to defeat her.”

It was a little too convenient of an explanation, but it was far less weight on their shoulders to believe it than believe that the Goddess was evil.

“People believe what they want to believe—whether it’s the truth or a fabrication.”

That was what the Demon King’s advisor told her when he’d told her in advance about the Goddess’s true nature, giving her a strategy for riding out the chaos.

“…Is this another punishment for our arrogance?”

Now tides had changed again. They began shouting abuse toward Elazonia, who they thought was the Evil God.

Vermeita sighed so no one could hear. It wasn’t wrong of them to believe in a god. The church was needed to remove the threats of monsters and bandits, to heal injury and disease, to even bring the dead back. But they had become drunk on the power of the immortal heroes. They used the threat of no healing or resurrection as a means to manipulate the countries, becoming a tyrannical institution that none could resist.

“We must change.” Vermeita looked to the images that played across the sky, determination in her heart.

No matter how the battle ended, there would be big changes in store for the church, but it was an opportunity to correct their corrupt customs.

“Yes, this is a good chance. This will allow me to build an ideal land where boys can love each other!”

She accidentally let her true goal slip from her lips, but it was swallowed by the roars of the people and went unnoticed.

Elazonia stood frozen in shock when she learned that everything had been seen by the entire continent.

Shinichi cackled evilly, almost like he was the Evil God.

“Ha-ha-ha! You should have realized something was going on when Arian was the only one to attack you!”

Celes was busy sending video footage to Sanctina through *Link*. Regina was supporting her student by providing magic, using a blocking spell to create a boundary that kept Elazonia from noticing the other chants. This was the final showdown. The only reason they made Arian fight it alone was because they had their hands full.

“I would have thought a Goddess could figure it out, but you didn’t even notice a pathetic trap.”

“Bastard…!”

“How does it feel for your world to come crashing down? How does it feel, knowing you’ve spent three hundred years for this very moment?”

Celes let out an exasperated sigh at Shinichi’s goading, which would be enough to make a real saint clothesline him.

“I’m going to edit that out,” she said.

After all they’d done to destroy the people’s faith in her, some people might sympathize with Elazonia if they heard this abuse.

As she continued to lend magic to Celes, Regina called her daughter, who was currently unoccupied, over.

“Sorry, Rino, would you switch with me?

“Yes.”

They switched, leaving Rino to supply magic while her mother started stretching her shoulders, her face brightening.

“Is it time for a little violence?” Regina passed by Arian, who was still panting, before launching into Elazonia.

“Lightning—” Elazonia immediately started to cast a spell, but Regina suddenly disappeared from in front of her.

In the same moment, a fist appeared to her right, crashing directly into her face.

“Gah!”

“So slow.”

Regina had used *Teleport* without an incantation to move next to Elazonia and follow through with an attack. The punch was strengthened enough to break through a steel plate. If the Goddess weren’t a mass of magic that surpassed Regina, she would have been turned to mincemeat in a second.

“You’re tough.”

“Grr…!” Elazonia vanished from in front of her.

The Blue Princess of War didn’t bother to turn around, instead casting a spell behind her.

“Explode, *Chaos Blast*.”

Hundreds of tiny black flames scattered across the area. They focused on Elazonia, detonating in a huge explosion to prevent her surprise attack.

“Gah…!”

“Ha-ha-ha, the only person who can thrust me from behind is my husband.”

“Try not to make dirty jokes! There are children watching!” shouted Shinichi, but Regina didn’t seem to care, glaring at Elazonia.

“Pity. You haven’t made use of your talents.”

The fact that she’d been able to handle Arian’s dragon sword and immediately engage with Regina meant Elazonia was a quick learner with good intuition.

However, the Blue Princess of War had left thousands of corpses in her wake over her lifetime. She possessed far more battle experience.

Elazonia was originally a magicologist, not a soldier, and it was obvious that wasn’t the greatest problem.

“You’ve never fought someone who was as strong as you, huh?”

“Don’t be stupid. I am Elazonia. There are none better than me,” she boasted.

“Maybe not…” Regina was looking at her in pity.

Before Elazonia had become a goddess, she still had magic on the same level as the Demon King or Regina, meaning she had been unrivaled back

then. Regina was painfully aware of the reason Elazonia had become so twisted.

“There’s no one more powerful than you, meaning you can get away with anything. Nice, isn’t it?” Regina spoke to the woman named Elen and herself, the Blue Princess of War.

No matter the enemy, she could blow them away with one magically enhanced fist or remove any trace of their existence with one spell. Regina was so powerful and committed so many acts of violence that everyone knelt to her, giving up on resisting. In Elen’s case, there was the potential enemy—the country itself—but it would have been easy for her to evade the law and become a murderer or any other kind of criminal. They were the same in that they were free because they were powerful.

“It’s really fun to use your power for whatever you want, beat the crap out of anyone who upsets you, and really feel like you’re all-powerful.”

But there was nothing after that. There was no one in front or beside them. It was just an empty desert called freedom. Their powers might have let them do anything, but there wasn’t even a friendly rival that could take on everything.

“You can be ‘free,’ but things get really boring when no one admonishes you or tries to tell you off.”

Regina, the Blue Princess of War, had found lots of things that took away her freedom, like her student who constantly complained about her getting involved in her personal life; or her husband the Blue Demon King, who she could fight against for her life; or even her beloved daughter. Elen had never been able to find a friend or companion who would put her freedom in check. Maybe her colleagues in the Magicology Department, but she had become too corrupted before she met them. Now that she’d given up being a human and become the Goddess, there wasn’t a single person standing beside her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t fight with you thousands of years ago. Take my fist as a token of my apology.”

“Are you done with your jokes? *Thunder Beast*!”

Regina’s words would never have reached Elazonia. After all, she no longer had her memories of the past. She created beasts from lightning and sent them to attack Regina.

But before the spell could attack Regina, a red cyclone rushed from the side, slicing apart the horde.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” cried Arian energetically, brandishing her dragon sword now that she’d cooled off.

“*Tsk.* Were you buying time?” asked Elazonia.

“No, I meant what I said before,” answered Regina as she patted Arian’s shoulder. “Thanks for covering for me.”

Right after that, Regina turned away and rushed over to her husband where he was encased in ice.

“Dear husband! Time to wake up, or did you plan on sleeping through all of this?” asked Regina, sounding like a newlywed as she began pounding at ice stronger than steel.

“I might have called you weak and cowardly, but you used your own body to protect our little Rino. I still love you!”

She smiled gently as her fists unloaded a succession of punches, cracking the ice pillar.

“Hurry up and wake up. If you don’t…I’ll start to think about finding someone else.”

Her kind eyes suddenly narrowed to a sharp glint.

“She’s annoying, but she’s strong. I mean, she beat you, even though she relied on underhanded tactics. I’d understand if you fell in love with her and gave yourself to her, but…”

Her hostility chilled the air, and black flames erupted from her fists, like physical manifestations of her jealousy.

“…I’d rather we go up in flames than give you to another woman. ♥ ”

Her girlish smile was like a demonic mask. The splits in the pillar ran deeper, cracking as they covered the entire pillar of ice. It exploded violently out from the inside, showering the area with sparkling shards, and the massive blue giant lowered his thick legs to the ground.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting!”

“Daddy!”

“Very uncool, Your Highness!” retorted his advisor.

The Demon King elected not to listen, wrapping his large arms around his wife for a long-awaited reunion.

“Regina, I apologize for the trouble.”

“What are you talking about? It was fun fighting for you.” She smiled, laying her head on his chest, which made him open his eyes wide in surprise.

“Haven’t you stopped loving me for my shameful loss…?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ll only stop loving you if you lose to me.”

“Hmph, well then, I will retrain until I am more powerful than a dragon.”

“There’s my husband.”

“Sorry to break this up, but we’re in the middle of a broadcast!” interrupted Shinichi as the married couple started smooching, forgetting everything was being livestreamed to the entire continent.

Arian had been facing off with Elazonia to afford enough time for their little reunion.

“Your Highness, could you please lend a hand?!”

“Of course.”

He looked at them, signaling he owed them one, before using magical flames to warm his chilled body.

“Elazonia, it’s not my style to pick on one fighter with a whole gang, but I cannot forgive you for your treachery. *And* you’ve made my beloved daughter cry, and that cannot be repaid with ten thousand deaths!”

“That’s what you care about?!”

“This place will become your grave! *Blade Storm*!”

Rays of light sprung from the Demon King’s palm, autonomously moving toward Elazonia and slashing at her as she barely managed to dodge Arian’s dragon sword.

“Gah! I’m the Goddess! I can’t allow these disgusting beasts to—!”

“Your comebacks just show that you’re pathetic.”

Shinichi’s comment stung.

Still, Elazonia knew how this battle would end. Arian’s dragon power was too much for her to control, even with the Demon King not being at full power, having just come back from the brink of death.

And then there was Regina, who was in the same class as the Demon King. Paired with their experience and synchronicity, it was hard to believe this was their first time fighting together. They had three times her raw power, and she didn’t have the battle experience. On top of that, she’d lost the faith of the people.

There was almost no chance of her winning. As her ghost form was whittled down, she used *Apport* to bring magic conductors up from the floor below, but that only bought her more time.

“Bastards… Bastards—!”

Rino looked sad as she watched Elazonia in pain, driven back into a corner. “Shinichi…”

“Okay. Let’s pause!” Shinichi understood, calling for the three to stop fighting.

“Hmph. What is it?” asked the Demon King, surprised; he was about to land the finishing blow.

He pulled his fist back and put some space between him and Elazonia.

Shinichi waited before addressing the ghost who was a moment away from destruction.

“Surrender. Commit no more evil acts and use your knowledge to help the people and atone for your sins. If you do, you’ll leave with your life.”

“What?!” exclaimed the Demon King.

He wouldn’t be satisfied until not a single shred of Elazonia remained, but he noticed Rino’s tears and shut his mouth.

“And are *you* okay with this?” Regina asked Shinichi like she couldn’t accept it. “I’m sure you haven’t forgotten when she used your childhood friend against you, even if it was just a fake copy.”

“I haven’t forgotten, and I’ll never forgive her for that. But I wouldn’t be any different from Elazonia if I wanted to destroy someone because I had a personal grudge against them… Rino showed me the way.”

“Hmm…” Regina had no choice but to close her mouth when her name came up.

“Huh? I never—”

“Lady Rino, quiet,” said Celes, covering the girl’s mouth.

Arian found that strange and tried to express her concerns. “Shinichi…”

“It’s okay. Leave it to me.” Shinichi smiled at her before turning back to Elazonia to demand her surrender. “You don’t have a single follower left on the continent of Uropeh. We’ve got you in checkmate. Set aside your hate and surrender.”

“…I see.” Elazonia nodded, her face turned down. *“Apport.”*

All the magic conductors from below appeared in neat rows behind her, a ghastly grin on her face.

“If none worship me here, I will destroy all the fools who allowed themselves to be manipulated by the demons. And then I will start anew on another continent!”

“So that’s what we’ve come to.” Shinichi was actually impressed by her idea, which made her seem like an evil god incarnate.

It was true that their broadcast was only reaching people on this continent, partially because the world was round and partially because they had limited magic. If she killed everyone who lived in Uropeh to silence them, she might be able to rebuild the church on the remaining two continents.

Shinichi wasn’t panicked at all. “It’s a perfect strategy—except for the fact that you can’t implement it.”

“You think I can’t? If I replicate the power of a *Nuclear Blast —*”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about.” Shinichi cut her off as she started to recount the power of the destructive spell. He already knew she’d researched nuclear fusion. He knew she could destroy the continent.

“But you don’t have any magic left,” he said, his mouth curling up into a crescent as he pointed to the magic conductors summoned to her.

The massive crystals should have contained enough magic to set off a thermonuclear blast and destroy the continent, but they had all lost their shine, indicating they were empty.

“That’s absurd! How?!”

Elazonia sent an eye down to the hero resurrection facility, witnessing golems broken from overuse and dead elven heroes scattered across the floor.

“This can’t be!”

“It’s a trap I set just in case. I wasn’t sure it’d go so well.”

A short while before Shinichi was smiling smugly in front of Elazonia, the elves were starting a massacre in the church of Oriens, a town on the far eastern side of the continent. The men were being slaughtered by an onslaught of attacks, but there was nothing for them to be upset about. In fact, their smiles were full of pure joy.

“Magic Arrow.”

“Let the elven arrow pierce my heaaaaart! ♥ ”

“Disgusting pigs! *Pressure Sphere*!”

“Break my whole body and turn me into mincemeat!”

The masochistic heroes put themselves in the way of Clarissa and the other two elves, groaning with pleasure as they were destroyed. As soon as their bodies disappeared, they were resurrected.

“A fire spell next! I want to feel your burning love!”

“Don’t come any closer, pervert. *Freezing Blood*!”

“So coooold! But I like it!” The hero let out another yelp of joy as he felt his body freeze from the inside out, then he died and was resurrected by the Goddess’s power.

The infinite loop of death and rebirth was actually leaving the elves exhausted.

“*Huff, huff*… Clarissa, how much longer do we need to do this?”

“That dirty human said we should do it until these guys stop getting resurrected!”

“But how long will that take…?”

Her two friends complained as she wiped the sweat from her brow. They’d repelled attacks from this same number of heroes in the past, but this was the first time that they killed them hundreds of times in a short period. Even though the elves were used to death, repeatedly killing the same person would be enough to warp even their minds.

“The whole church reeks like blood and guts. *Blergh*…”

“Is it my chance to receive this holy hurl?!”

“Outta the way! It’s mine!”

“Even roaches wouldn’t stoop so low! *Fire Storm*!”

While one of Clarissa’s friends violently vomited, Clarissa was busy burning away the heroes. Then she tried to encourage her friend who was near tears.

“It’s tough, but we’ll push through this. Then that dirty human will introduce us to some hot sadistic dark elf boys!”

“I would rather have a boyfriend who isn’t mean…”

Clarissa’s friends looked at her in irritation as she started to pant from all the excitement of imaging the torture inflicted by her future boyfriend.

The leader of the masochists, the tavern owner, saw her. His face showed sheer agony.

“No way… I can’t believe those beautiful elf ears would be violated by a demon…”

“Now that you know, you should stop obsessing over—”

“It hurts so bad I feel like my chest is going to burst… And it feels so goooooood!”

“Gross!”

Clarissa kicked the tavern owner hard enough to shatter his heart, which had just realized it enjoyed emotional torture as much as physical torment. Her friends both thought that she herself wasn’t really in a position to judge him, but they decided not to say anything.

Elazonia’s jaw dropped when she learned that the elven masochistic heroes had been killed and resurrected hundreds of times, burning through her magic reserves.

Shinichi laughed so hard it made his sides hurt.

“Heh-heh-heh! Ah-ha-ha! It’s so satisfying to see your immortal punching bags sweep your feet out from under you!”

It had been too annoying for her to resurrect each hero by hand, especially when their deaths were unpredictable.

That was why she used the magic conductors to automate the process. The Red Dragon had showed them in the planet’s memories.

Shinichi had asked Clarissa to kill the masochistic heroes as he broke into Elazonia’s underground laboratory to distract her. The strategy worked perfectly.

“There’s no way I’d just stand around chatting for no reason, right?”

He’d known there wasn’t even a one in a million chance that Rino’s little speech would work, but he let her do it anyway, and his call for surrender was to waste more time.

“Bastard…!”

“Don’t get it twisted. Rino didn’t lie about wanting to be friends. And I didn’t lie when I said you should atone.”

His face turned serious as Elazonia gritted her teeth. The Goddess’s knowledge of magicology was excellent. If she had been willing to reform and use that to help people, he had every intention of setting aside his personal grudge. But that would be a miracle—with less of a chance than an asteroid collision. As he’d expected, it didn’t happen.

“I knew you would refuse our offers!” said Shinichi in a telepathic message, because it would be hard for Rino if she were to hear.

Elazonia grimaced. “Your every move is despicable…!”

“Says the one who deceived people, took Rino hostage, turned down a peace offering, then tried to kill every human on the continent in a nuclear explosion. I don’t really want to say it, but you might be the world’s greatest

villain,” said Shinichi with a smile and a shrug like he was upset that she hadn’t accepted their offer.

He might have set it up with his outcome in mind, but it was definitely Elazonia who chose the path of destruction.

“Anyway, now I don’t have to feel bad about beating the crap out of you!”

“Shinichi…” warned Arian with a crooked smile.

“As dirty as always,” finished Celes, looking annoyed, editing that out of the livestream.

Elazonia’s shoulders were shaking in rage. She exploded the last of her magical power.

“Burn in divine light and perish! *Holy Torrent*!”

A flood of rays shot toward Shinichi, engulfing the lab, but the Demon King and Regina suspected she might try something and cast a defense spell in tandem.

““Fortress!””

Two magical walls joined into a hinge that sliced apart the deluge of light, skewing its trajectory to the side. The walls crumbled. Dust fluttered through the air. Shinichi rushed toward Elazonia.

“Your Highness!”

“It was all you.”

“We’ll hand it over to you.”

Both the Demon King and Regina understood what he meant, casting another spell.

““Procure our enemy’s freedom, *Photon Bind*.””

Chains of light wrapped around Elazonia’s ghostly figure, leaving her incapacitated.

“Argh!”

She had let her anger get the best of her and used up the last of her magic on *Holy Torrent*, making her flicker out like a candle in the wind. She had no power left to shake off the chains.

“Arian!” called Shinichi.

“Got it!” She understood his intentions as well and dashed up to run alongside him.

It’s not that he was being sly and trying to take the glory for himself. He knew that even though they’d revealed her true identity, there were those who would continue to worship her. He knew it would be best for a human to strike the finishing blow to keep her followers from hating the demons even more.

That was one reason.

The bigger reason was simpler: He wouldn’t feel right if he didn’t pay her back himself for all the pain she’d put him through.

“This is the end for you!”

Arian laid her right hand on top of Shinichi’s left hand as the two raised the dragon sword. Elazonia couldn’t move as they sliced down with an earsplitting cry.

“”Hi-yaaaaaah!””

That strike split her ghostly body in two.

“Bye, *Evil God* Elazonia.”

Shinichi’s final words marked the end of the ghost known as the Goddess of Light.

“You dirty—!”

Her last moment was spent trying to hex him with a curse, but she shattered into shards of light that bounced…and then disappeared. The room that hosted their battlefield felt unbelievably serene.

Shinichi murmured under his breath, “You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

He turned around, holding Arian’s hand, and they raised the dragon sword toward the sky as they looked at Celes, who was acting as their camera. The people of Uropeh let out hoots of joy as the heroic figures destroyed the evil god. The Goddess’s symbol began to vanish from the heroes’ bodies, starting with Sanctina.

That was how the manipulative Goddess was destroyed and the curse of the hero was lifted, closing the curtain on an entire era.

Epilogue

After resurrecting the masochistic tavern owner and his companions in the underground facility and chucking them out into a nearby field, Shinichi stretched toward the blue sky.

“It’s finally over.”

He’d been summoned by the Demon King. His daily life had turned into fighting the immortal heroes, but that had finally come to an end. Shinichi felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The Demon King bowed his head.

“Shinichi, I thank you again. Having you as my advisor has been a stroke of luck. Almost as great as Regina and Rino being a part of my life.”

“You’re going to make me blush,” said Shinichi with a pleased smile.

There was no greater flattery from the Blue Demon King, who dearly loved his wife and daughter.

Regina smiled and interrupted their conversation. “Don’t get embarrassed. You’ve done something that we’ll owe you for the rest of our lives. Hey! How about I let you marry Rino to show our thanks?!”

“What?! I’ll never allow that, even if it is Shinichi!” bellowed the Demon King, his gratitude flipping immediately to shock.

Regina admonished him with an icy expression. “But he beat the wretch that defeated you. That means he’s stronger than you—and qualified to be Rino’s husband.”

Her argument wasn’t quite correct, but it was the demon’s way to say that a loser was simply making excuses if they claimed an opponent cheated. The winner was seen as the strongest.

“Urgh, no, but…”

The Demon King was indebted to Shinichi. While he acknowledged Shinichi’s strength, he couldn’t easily agree to letting his daughter be a bride, leaving him in distress.

“Ha-ha-ha, these parents are trouble.”

“……”

Shinichi laughed and brushed off the conversation, then looked at Rino, but she didn’t seem like she’d been listening. Instead she was glumly staring at the ground.

“Do you regret not being able to save Elazo—I mean, Elen?”

“Yes. I know it’s selfish of me…” Rino quickly acknowledged he was right and pressed her hand over her pained heart.

It was the sad truth that there were people in that world that couldn’t be reasoned with, making violence the only option to resolve the situation. Though Rino was young and innocent, she understood that, but still wished she could have saved the lonely woman who had continued hating in order to hide her own tears.

“Would I have been able to be friends with Elen if I were older?”

“No, I think it was impossible.” Shinichi shook his head.

Elen had died when her memories as a human were erased, giving birth to the vengeful spirit called Elazonia. It was too late to try and extend a friendly hand to her. Even if her memories had remained, she probably wouldn’t have been able to change her ways.

“It sounds nice to say you’ll use words to persuade someone instead of violence, but really that’s just a way to make brainwashing sound nice,” said Shinichi.

“That’s not…” Rino tried to argue but didn’t make a peep after that.

Sanctina had been a devout member of the church. She’d done a one-eighty and turned into a pervert in love with Rino, and it was hard to argue that couldn’t be attributed to brainwashing.

“The difference between persuasion and brainwashing is only a matter of the degree. It’s not necessarily verbal abuse, but manipulating someone’s thoughts can be crueler than some lesser violence.”

“I guess so…” Rino realized she might have been the most violent person because she was so against physical violence.

Shinichi gently stroked her head. “I like your way of thinking. It’s just that that idiot of a woman had her own way. It’s arrogant to try and change that. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Just like that dumbass girl who had stuck to her principles of being kind, even when people around her called her out on it. Elen had enough pride to stick to her own ways, too. It would be an insult to her memory to claim that her life was wrong, even if they had to eliminate her for being in their way.

“That’s why, if there’s one thing you can do, it’s to remember her.”

“Remember her?”

“Yes. They say, ‘the only one more pitiful than the deceased is a person forgotten.’ You should try to think about her every once in a while.”

Just like Shinichi would never forget Nozomi, that was the best thing she could offer to the departed.

“Well, that’s probably not something I should say, since I ruined Elazonia’s good name and turned her into an evil god.”

“Classic ‘look who’s talking’ moment,” said Celes as he backtracked.

Rino’s smile settled back on her face. “Heh-heh, Shinichi, you’re so kind.”

“But that is not a reason she should marry you!” snarled the Demon King.

“Let’s move away from this topic,” said Shinichi, treating her father with caution as he stalked him like an angry tiger.

“Hmph…” Rino pouted when Shinichi seemed like he wasn’t interested.

Arian saw her reaction, realized things could get ugly, and decided to change the subject. “Anyway, now we have peace!”

With the Goddess defeated, the immortal heroes had disappeared. Arian was happy about it, but Shinichi looked at her with a huge grin on his face.

“That’s not true,” he said, dashing her hopes.

"…What?"

"Okay. The heroes are gone. The church has been weakened. The people are pent up with irritation, which is going to explode at once. Peace isn't here to stay! It's time for mass chaos!"

Every fiber of his being seemed to enjoy the prospect, but Arian stood there flabbergasted.

"First, a revolt against the church, which has oppressed the people. Any humble priests will be spared, but any corrupt ones will be a different story."

"If you don't have the money to afford the healing, you can pay with your body."

"Don't get behind on your regular donations if you want me to resurrect you."

Crooked priests would manipulate the people and even royalty. They didn't serve a merciful goddess but a wicked evil god. The people had now received a perfect justification for fighting back, and they'd already seen what could happen when their anger exploded.

"Having rocks thrown at them! Being chased around! Those will be some of the lighter treatments. The people might start burning priests at the stake to keep them from being resurrected. Ha-ha-ha!"

"That's terrible…"

"Just kidding. I don't actually think things will be that bad," said Shinichi, rushing to retract his former statement when he saw tears welling up in Rino's eyes.

But the priests who'd committed grave acts of evil would get what they deserved. That didn't mean all priests would be eradicated, though.

"Even though they've fallen out of favor, the people need them to heal their wounds and illnesses."

There weren't that many people capable of using healing magic. There were very few places like Tigris Kingdom, which had secured their own independent healers. Large countries and cities would be better off, but the small towns and villages would end up shorthanded, which meant few people would want to move there because potential earnings would be low. That was why there was a need for an organization like the church and its priests to dispatch healers to all the different locations.

"On the other hand, the unaffiliated magic users and medicine users can set up shop since the church won't chase them into hiding anymore. That means no more unethical practices!"

Society would shift to one with proper market competition, but there would be massive changes in its structure. There was no way to avoid the chaos and strife that would come along with that.

"And the biggest problem is that the heroes have lost their immortality, meaning the number of monsters will increase."

"Oh, that's right!" said Arian when she realized that was true.

It wouldn’t apply to her, but some heroes had relied too heavily on their immortality and neglected to maintain their training, leaving them at a significant risk of being killed by monsters. Now that they’d lost their protection from the Goddess, they wouldn’t resurrect at the nearest church. If their body was eaten by a beast, they couldn’t be resurrected, leaving them dead.

“It’s the ones that went soft because of their immortality. They’ll fear death, run away, and start hunting the easy monsters.”

If they left the powerful monsters, it’d result in damages to human settlements.

“…Was it a problem that we defeated Elazonia?” Arian asked, looking concerned, but Shinichi shook his head.

“No. The immortal heroes caused a lot of damage. I’m just saying they were useful in some ways.”

There were heroes who used their immortality to stand against threats, which let them take out monsters and criminals. It was a fact that they protected the peace, but this convenient hack made their spirits rot. When those heroes started to commit evil acts, they became an unstoppable danger. Weighing the pros and cons, the cons came out on top.

“But we can’t leave dangerous monsters to wreak havoc!”

She felt some responsibility because her own father, the Red Dragon, was one of the sources of monsters.

Shinichi cracked his usual devious smile. “That’s where we come in. What if the demons defeat monsters in place of the church’s former heroes?”

“Everyone will be grateful?”

“Exactly! It’s one step to turn the tables.”

Rino struck the people’s hearts in the livestream, meaning there were some people who realized they may have misunderstood the demons. However, they would fear their strength since they watched the Demon King defeat even a god, meaning there would be many civilians treating them with caution.

“How do you get rid of hate and make people like you? It’s simple! You show that your existence is beneficial.”

If people started to associate demons with hunting monsters and removing danger, they would start to like the demons—or at least not want to destroy them.

“In other words, the mass chaos will actually be a welcoming reception to help the demons set down roots on the surface! Ha-ha-ha!”

“You have the dirtiest mind ever,” quipped Celes.

That only made him laugh harder. He accepted her insult, turning his back on what was the grave of a woman who had tried to become a god.

“We need to rebuild the Demon King’s castle and the fields, organize and manage a monster strike force, build a communication network to take requests for assistance from across the continent, and reconcile with the

church. I want to talk to the people in Mouse Village again, and I promised we'd find husbands for Clarissa and her friends. There's so much to do."

"Uh-huh!" Arian agreed.

"Let's work hard for everyone!" cried Rino.

Smiles spread on their faces despite knowing their grueling schedule.

"I would like to return and rest for a while," said Celes.

"Agreed. It was the most fun I've had in a long time, but I'm beat," admitted Regina.

"We need to spend some quality time together!" added the Demon King as he lifted Rino.

He was the only one of the three who seemed to have any energy left.

Shinichi looked around at all of them and remembered his original goal.

He couldn't be further from a philanthropist. He was just a selfish human.

That was why he'd used information to manipulate people, killed the Goddess, and thrown the world into total chaos.

If historians in the future were to know the truth about his actions, they would brand him humanity's greatest traitor.

Even if that happened, Shinichi would just flash his crooked smile without a care in the world.

He only wanted to live with his favorite people: the clumsy half-dragon hero, the innocent daughter of the Demon King, and the dark-elf maid of few words.

"All right! Let's create a world of fun!" called Shinichi, looking up toward the blue sky.

And so they all set forward together.

Afterword

Hello, readers of the Famitsu Bunko imprint. It's Sakuma Sasaki, the one who can never go back to using a hard drive now that I've gotten a taste of an SSD.

This is the final volume of The Dirty Way to Destroy the Goddess's Heroes.

There is no greater happiness for a writer than completing a series without running out of ideas. I attribute this to all the people who supported me. Thank you very much.

I might have jumped the gun with my closing words since there will be one more volume: a sequel that gives a look into the main characters' lives after accomplishing their main goal of defeating the "Goddess's heroes."

I wanted to touch on some loose ends and mysteries, like Arian's mom.

And most importantly, there's been no clear winner on the romantic front. I don't know if it'll be the answer to your prayers, but I'll tell you the canon ship in the sequel.

I hope you don't mind the wait. I think I should be able to get it out by this coming winter.

After that, I plan to start working on a new series. Nothing is set is stone, and I don't have any concrete information to pass along. What I can say is that I promise to continue writing novels, even if there is a slight hiatus.

I would like to express my gratitude.

Thank you to Asagi Tosaka for your gorgeous illustrations. I know you've been busy since you found out that *Girly Air Force* is getting adapted to an anime.

Thank you to my chief editor, Kimiko Gibu, for your invaluable advice and support.

Thank you to all the people involved in publishing this book, including the printers, distribution teams, and bookstores.

Finally, I would like to close with a thank you to all the readers who bought and supported this series, giving me the opportunity to finish writing it.

Sakuma Sasaki, July 2018

Afterword

Hello! This is Asagi Tosaka.

We finally beat the Goddess in this climactic volume.

It's bittersweet: I'm happy to make it to the end, but I'm sad it's over.

I obviously love this story, and it has been a joy illustrating all the characters, who are delightful in their own ways. I'm very happy I got to work on this series.

Thank you for reading all the way to the end!

遠坂あさぎ

Asagi Tosaka

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